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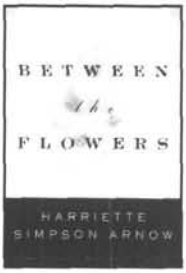

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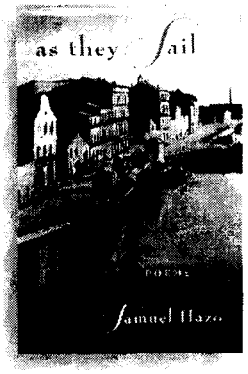

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

VOLUME LII NUMBER 3 AUTUMN 1999

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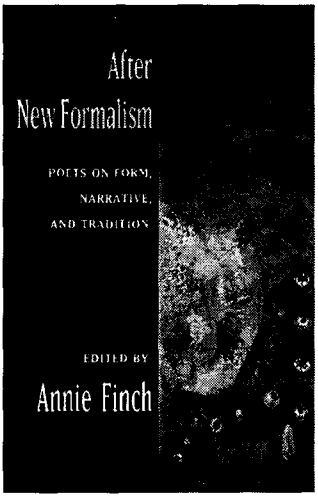

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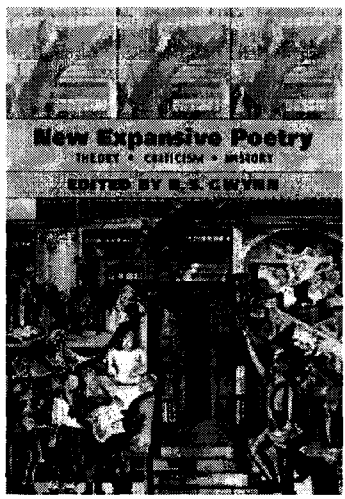

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ALFRED CORN

The Wordsworth Retrospective

The bicentennial year of the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* is either an arbitrary or propitious moment to revisit the infancy of English Romanticism and see what can be made of it now—the "infancy" of the movement being Wordsworth and Coleridge. No essay of moderate length could add anything substantial to our sense of *both* poets. Incontestably great, Coleridge is even so the lesser of the young innovators who sent that little book out onto the troubled seas of its reception in the eighteenth century's closing years. Besides, when trained on Wordsworth, a reader's retrospective glance only simulates in different terms the characteristic stance of English poetry's amplest autobiographical author. Turning back to 1798, what we see is a poet facing away from us, reflecting on the years that are no more. The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* maintains that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." For those purposes, recollecting demands an inquisitive, sometimes a revisionary, backward look. Despite a considerable number of Wordsworth poems written in the present tense and in the mood of the lyrical "O, now, *now*!", the texts most intensely Wordsworthian are those dealing with the past, retrospective evocations in which the lyric narrator tries to experience anew, understand, and evaluate what has happened to him, sifting the past for clues concerning his present state of being and future prospects. In the pronouncement about "emotion recollected in tranquillity," the Romantic theorist is only making a program out of what must already constitute a habit of mind. That habit is not his alone. In the third book of *Confessions*, which Wordsworth had certainly read, Rousseau says, "But all the same I do not know how to see what is before my eyes; I can only see clearly in retrospect, it is only in my memories that my mind can work."

The golden age for Wordsworth lies in the past, and his backward glances are invariably tinged with the pain of loss.

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Sometimes the loss is expressed with terrible intensity as, for example, in the famous couplet from "Resolution and Independence": "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness"; or again in "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle," where he says, "I have submitted to a new control: / A power is gone, which nothing can restore; / A deep distress hath humanized my Soul. . . . The feeling of my loss will ne'er be old. . . ." The usual course his poems take is not simply to rest with the sense of loss, but to find consolation beyond that loss or even redemption, however constructed. Emotional loss leads to imaginative gain. The notion of poetry as compensation for the wounds of experience will strike no one, I think, as farfetched. Reflection often begins with pain, leading to an understanding compensatory for poets partly because it finds expression in words the poet has chosen, words that could have arrived no other way.

You can see how Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" would have seemed adequate compensation, given that it is one of the greatest of all Romantic poems. But are we certain we understand what was lost, what stood in need of the reparation available in poetry? The title is "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour." Right away with that title and with the subscript date "July 13, 1798," the factuality, even the historicity, of the poem rushes to the foreground. Wordsworth wrote several other poems titled "Lines," plus the label of specific events, for example the one called "Lines on the Expected Invasion," dated 1803. The word "lines," for someone with Wordsworth's extensive training in geometry and mathematics, suggests defining demarcations. He uses it for poems that deal with transitions from one condition or state to another, and, in at least one case, for a poem that touches on military and political borders. The "lines" on the expected invasion are a call to arms addressed to a British public confronted with the possibility of war with Napoleon in their own land.

British readers are more likely to know than the rest of us that Tintern Abbey is situated on a very ancient national boundary. The Wye, which Wordsworth's title makes special mention of, was (and is) the southwestern dividing line between England and Wales. Remains of a primitive wall built by the legendary King

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Offa in the eighth century are still to be seen on the bluffs overhanging the river's east bank. This wall, known as Offa's Dike, once separated the kingdom of Mercia from the then unconquered homeland of the Welsh. Wordsworth could not have failed to see the ruined wall, and to be conscious of the boundary lines he was looking across. "Tintern Abbey," then, deals with ancient political "lines" as well as the life-lines that divide one stage of experience from another.

The best view of Tintern is from the cliffs on the eastern, or English side of the Wye. Here the spectator stands more than a hundred feet above the ruin and the river. Wordsworth's phrase "a few miles above Tintern Abbey" means that he was north of it. My sense is that he was also higher than it—on a higher plane, with all the responsibility attached to a wider prospect. If this vista stirred elegiac feelings in the poet, we can find causes for them. From Anglo-Saxon Britain at the conclusion of the century of Enlightenment, he looked down toward a territory England had eventually annexed, a territory with a rich Celtic tradition of chivalry and poetry. Wordsworth could see the ruined abbey, originally a monastic community, destroyed after Henry VIII's break with Rome and his institution of a state religion that allowed reason to play a role along with revelation in the formulation of doctrine. Here were eloquent remnants of a ruined past, a past especially associated with imaginative and irrational aspects in human consciousness. In fact, Tintern Abbey had been a tourist attraction since the 1760s, sought out by amateurs of the Gothic, a vogue that had begun with Horace Walpole and the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis. A favorite way of visiting it was to arrive on a moonlit night with hand-held torches, so that appropriately medieval shadows might be cast on the walls and arches of the ruin.

Wordsworth's poem, however, is set during the daylight hours, and at the remove of a few miles. A prose account of his visit was given to the poet's nephew Christopher Wordsworth and included in the latter's *Memoirs* of 1851. Wordsworth says, "No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of four or five days, with my sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written

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down till I reached Bristol." Bristol of course is in England, and in this context the phrase "crossing the Wye" has the force of "crossing the Rubicon." What he leaves behind is a rustic landscape where the boundaries between human and natural objects are blurred—the hedgerows that are "hardly hedgerows, little *lines* [my emphasis] / Of sportive wood run wild" and the "pastoral farms, / Green to the very door;"). From there he proceeds to an urban, human construction, the chartered streets of a bustling port city in England. According to Wordsworth's statement, the returning pilgrims did not reach Bristol until July 13, the date given to the poem.

The Tintern lines begin with a precise autobiographical accounting, as if contemplation of the historical past could only lead to recollection of what has gone before in one's own life. "Five years have past; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters! And again I hear / These waters. . . ." The date inscribed at the beginning of the poem fixes the time of his first visit as the summer of 1793. This was during the developmental phase of Wordsworth's career as poet, his main achievements at that time poems like "An Evening Walk" and "Descriptive Sketches." In this period, the twenty-three-year-old Wordsworth still had fresh memories of his encounter with the French Revolution; and he still assumed his separation from Annette Vallon and their natural child Anne-Caroline would be temporary. Revolutionary associations are heightened by the time frame: it is July 13, the eve of the ninth anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Actually, the figures *9* and *8* need only be transposed to give us the actual year when the first blow against the *ancien régime* was struck. In the arrangement Wordsworth gave to his poems in 1815, two poems farther on past "Tintern Abbey" is a poem titled "French Revolution," also retrospective, and containing the often quoted "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!" One more relevant fact: The impulse to visit Tintern again came after an evening spent in Bath with William Losh, an acquaintance from Wordsworth's Paris interlude. Another guest at this dinner on July 8, 1798, was the Reverend Richard Warner, who had just published *A Walk Through Wales*, its frontispiece an aquatint of Tintern Abbey. Also present was Warner's friend William Johnson, a wine merchant of Bordeaux, who had served with the French Republican army. Wordsworth wouldn't have lacked

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topics to discuss with these fellow travelers; memories both voluntary and involuntary were likely to have been stirred. In any case, what we know is that Wordsworth made up his mind right then to revisit Tintern Abbey, and return to a previous moment in his development. The Abbey served as an emblem of an earlier phase: youth and passion, Annette Vallon and the French Revolution.

In the context of these retrospective considerations, at once historical and autobiographical, the matter of the poem is raised. Recording once again the sights and sounds of his pastoral prospect—"these beauteous Forms"—as he names them, and saying that their memory has sustained him through intervening difficulties and trials, he recognizes that he is no longer the same person as the young man who enjoyed this same view five years earlier. "For nature then / (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days, / And their glad animal movements all gone by) / To me was all in all.—I cannot paint / What then I was. The sounding cataract / Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock, / The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood, / Their colours and their forms, were then to me / An appetite; a feeling and a love, / That had no need of a remoter charm, / By thought supplied, or any interest / Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more, / And all its dizzy raptures."

It's impossible to read this without a sharp sense of the poet's perception of change as a kind of diminishment. The lines point toward two successive losses, the first only hinted at in the parenthetical phrases about "boyish days" and "glad animal movements." This earliest phase is replaced by the superior plane occupied by the Wordsworth of 1793, itself supplanted in 1798 by one in some respects even more elevated. Apart from descriptive passages (and, metaphorically, even within them) the poem has to be read as an argument conducted between the claims of unconscious pleasure and the more refined thought that comes afterward. "Other gifts / Have followed, for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense." After these claims comes one of the best known passages in Wordsworth, the lines on Nature as a dwelling place and intimation of the Divine—which is still not to be equated with Nature. Beyond its undeniable appeal to the excerpter, this passage gives poetic expression to German ideal-

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istic philosophy, according to which the material world has meaning and life only through the human spirit, understood as being one substance with the Divine. Coleridge's expression of that view comes in the "Dejection" Ode: "I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within." For the practicing artist the issue is posed at its acutest: If Nature were all in all, then it would be a sufficient text, and poetry could be dispensed with as a needless gloss. But Wordsworth the poet and thinker can only believe matters stand otherwise and assume that poetic authority comes at the expense of an unreflective fusion with the material world, even (or especially) when that world takes the form of beautiful landscape.

Wordsworth doesn't say whether choice plays a large role in this change of perspective; he implies that it is part of an inexorable process of growing older. From the summit of his twenty-eight years, he bids farewell to the unreflectiveness of an earlier phase as epitomized for him in a particular landscape; and takes up the burden of maturity as he leaves that landscape behind. What you don't sense here is any great tranquility resulting from the poet's substitution of wisdom for immature rapture. How overlook the power of the passage describing his youthful union with Nature—and isn't it like sexual union, with its "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures"? When Wordsworth says that other gifts have *followed*, he does not say they have *replaced* unconscious pleasures. These gifts are "for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense." "Would" in this sentence has to bear a tremendous weight of ascetic resolve, and one sees that the rhetoric is designed to convince first and chiefly the poet himself that his loss has been made good.

If the great passage that begins, "For I have learned . . ." did not follow directly after, we might assume that there had been very little recompense at all. Redemptive consciousness is presented once again as thoroughly involved with natural scenes; and Wordsworth concludes the passage not with a dismissal of nature but instead the statement, "Therefore am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods, / And mountains . . ." He goes on to say he is "pleased to recognize / In Nature and the language of the sense, / The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my mortal being." The personification here portrays a character less exciting

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than a sexual partner, but nonetheless offers testimonial assurance of a vivifying attachment.

It also leads to the final section of the poem, the part that evokes the poet's sister Dorothy, addressed as both "dearest Friend" and "dear, dear Sister." The companion of his walks embodies all his earlier enthusiasm for nature in active and undiluted form. The poet sees in his sister evidence of his former pleasures in the shooting lights of her wild eyes, and hopes to behold in her yet a little while what he once was. Even so, he envisages a day in which her "wild ecstasies shall be matured / Into a sober pleasure," when her mind "shall be a mansion for all lovely forms, / [her] memory be as a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies. . . ." That lies in the future. Her present psychic development is perhaps prefigured in the earlier observations concerning "these orchard tufts, / Which at this season, with their unripe fruits, / Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves / 'Mid groves and copses," a passage coming just before the description of the imaginary hermit, the hermit who "sits alone." We are meant, I think, to associate this figure with the poet himself, already beginning to plan a long poem titled *The Recluse*. Wordsworth's ambivalent estimate concerning the respective claims of "wild ecstasies" and "sober pleasure" is sharply marked here. If these former pleasures are minor compared to the mature mansion of the mind, why does he long to behold them yet a little while? If Nature is not in itself divine, how can it be the guide, nurse, and soul of all his moral being? On the other hand, he says, "Therefore am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods," the adverb "still" letting us know how much less he is a lover of them than he once was. When friends say to us, "I still like you," we know their affections have passed through some sort of struggle that has left a mark on them, probably permanent.

I'm not saying that ambivalence is a fault in the poem. Part of Wordsworth's achievement is a presentation of his conflicting feelings about the change that time has brought to his understanding of the world. He could have resolved the problem by coming down thumpingly in favor of either Nature or Spirit, but instead he explores his allegiance to each of them. Rightly so: Poems are not so much pure argument as a record and embodiment of the mental activity and feelings surrounding thinking.

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An instinct for dialectic is an essential talent for poetry as for most other arts.

Wordsworth has, by increase in number of years and the advance of reason, come to his conclusions and his knowledge of the "still, sad music of humanity." But he is not at all cold toward his earlier more passional relationship to things. "Tintern Abbey" is only the first signpost of the move toward reason and rectitude that will become steadily more pronounced in his poetry, eventually, most readers agree, to its detriment. The "Lines on the Expected Invasion" of 1803 calls for resoluteness on the part of the public to "save this honoured land from every lord / But British reason and the British sword." This comes only five years—or should I say five winters—after the visit to the banks of the Wye. Even as early as 1798 Wordsworth's commitment to Annette Vallon had dissolved, as well as his revolutionary political views. In his poem "The French Revolution" he characterized the earlier era as a time "When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights, / When most intent on making of herself / A prime Enchantress—to assist the work / Which then was going forward in her name!" French Reason, then, "a prime Enchantress," passion, and violence lay behind; British reason and the still, sad music of humanity lay before. About Nature one can say that it has become for the poet less like a mother or a sexual partner and more like a sister or a friend for whom one feels great esteem and love at a remove.

I've focused on the elegiac tone that pervades Wordsworth's first intuition of the change overtaking him because the poem is too often presented as the serene record of an achieved maturity. Just as powerfully, it is a lament, or, perhaps, an epitaph. Wordsworth wrote an "Essay Upon Epitaphs," published in *The Friend*, and astute observers like Geoffrey Hartman and Frances Ferguson have noted how important for him epitaphic consciousness was. A number of the poems are résumés of the lives of characters now deceased, and so serve as extended, "unofficial" epitaphs. What may be more difficult to see is that many poems of Wordsworth's *own* experience are also epitaphs: The poet regards himself at an earlier date, recollects the emotion associated with that phase, concedes that its life has ended, and draws apposite conclusions. Frances Ferguson speaks of a "link between autobiography and epitaph which implies that the themes of growth and

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immortality never stand far from the theme of death," and goes so far as to characterize Wordsworth's autobiographical mode in verse as "serial epitaph."[1]

Actually, the poems about other characters who died ought also to be understood as aspects of Wordsworth himself that have come to an end. If so, then he had, on one side, a funereal imagination on an unusual scale. Nevertheless, a process of regeneration is also implied: Dead selves are replaced by new forms of imaginative life. "Tintern Abbey" hardly completes the process of bereavement in this poet's psychology and work. The very next poem he wrote, "There was a Boy," is an epitaphic recollection of a character who must be understood as Wordsworth himself, if only because many of the details are taken from the boy's experience when he is entirely alone, and so without witnesses to record his actions and thoughts. Manuscript studies have noted, too, that in earlier versions the poem was written in the first person. Wordsworth took a step in the direction of frank disclosure when he placed the "Boy of Winander" episode in Book V of his autobiographical *The Prelude*, even though he does not change it to first-person narration. This boy has, in any case, the same unmediated relationship to Nature as the one described in the latter half of "Tintern Abbey," a condition now forever defunct. Poets must reckon with more than one sort of death.

One or even two great epitaphs were not enough to lay these ghosts for Wordsworth. In the fall and winter of 1798–99, when William and Dorothy (and Coleridge) were in Germany, he wrote four of the five poems in the "Lucy" series, among his best known works. Much scholarly labor has gone into the question of "Lucy"'s identity, but nothing solid has been established. The reason is that Lucy is fictional. During this same fall and winter, Wordsworth wrote another ballad that tells the sad tale of a character named Lucy Gray, a subject based on a true story told to him by Dorothy Wordsworth, as his note to the poem acknowledges. But Lucy Gray has been made as fictional as the later Lucy who, herself, lacks a surname; nor do the details of their stories coincide. Wordsworth liked the name Lucy, and why shouldn't he, since it suggests "light" and since St. Lucy is the patron of the eyes and eyesight.

[1] Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven, 1977), pp. 155–156.

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The poems in the series underline Lucy's closeness to nature, which is the realm of the eye that a mature mind will eventually relinquish in favor of non-visual insight. The allegorical dimension of the poems has to do with this process as already outlined in "Tintern Abbey" and "There was a Boy." When the poet mourns Lucy's death, he is lamenting the gradual attenuation of a psychic capacity in himself—a psychic capacity and a poetics no longer functioning for him. We notice that the speaker's first intimation of Lucy's death comes when he sees the moon set behind her cottage. If we go along with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that "The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact," then we have to understand this moonset as the terminal point for one approach to poetry. In this instance again Lucy personifies Wordsworth's earlier unmediated relationship to nature, which he most often associates with a feminine principle—Mother, Nurse, Sister, Girl-Child, and, here, Lady-love. It's instructive to recall that, in his 1815 arrangement, Wordsworth placed "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" and "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower" under the heading of "Poems of the Imagination," and the remainder of the Lucy poems under "Poems Founded on the Affections." That should be sufficient reason for seeing in them relevance both to his life as a poet and to his own psychological history. Perhaps then we should detect that feelings concerning the separation from Annette Vallon and their child also contribute something to the poems, if only because the lamented Lucy is sometimes presented as a young woman and sometimes as a child. To say that Wordsworth's decision not to provoke scandal by bringing Annette and their little girl to England was reasonable under the circumstances is to give short shrift to emotion and its role in the life of a poet. We can only speculate about the result of this decision on the mind and work of the sage of Dove Cottage. Guilt there almost certainly was, and because of guilt, a resolve to reform and atone. The negative note sounds loudest in what is probably the sequence's best-known lyric:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
  I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
  The touch of earthly years.

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No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

What may be less clear is that the Lucy poems also have a bearing on Wordsworth's relationship to Dorothy. Coleridge raised the possibility [in a letter to Thomas Poole in April 1799] that Wordsworth's Lucy poems were a premonitory recording of what he might feel if Dorothy were to die. Given that Wordsworth associates Dorothy with early and powerful sources of inspiration, an inspiration no longer operative, perhaps we can say that Wordsworth is mourning the death of a sister-muse who has been *internalized.* Tact alone would require his giving her another name. It's also possible that the Lucy poems are a lament (or some sort of expiation in the form of a lament) for the passage from immature ecstasy to sober maturity Wordsworth has envisaged for his sister—envisaged and perhaps instigated by the Tintern Abbey "Lines." How must it have felt to be the addressee of that poem? Dorothy Wordsworth was anything but unintelligent. She would not have failed to understand that for her brother, she represented an earlier, less evolved stage of development; and his praise of her "wild ecstasies" in response to natural beauty may not have struck her as arguments compelling enough for holding onto them and resisting the encroachments of maturity and detachment. The poem looks forward to a time when Dorothy will have followed the same emotional and spiritual evolution as her brother, with attendant losses and hypothetical gains. Wordsworth here projects his own ambivalence onto his sister's future development. Reading it, she would see herself portrayed as immature and ecstatic but predestined to maturity and the still, sad music of humanity.

It's hard to believe that, after she'd had time to understand the implications of "Tintern Abbey," Dorothy Wordsworth could find its set of propositions pleasant or agreeable. If in fact she felt misunderstood or wounded by the poem, would she have been able to conceal her feelings entirely? And would she have been able to go on as before, exclaiming over the all-sufficient loveliness of nature? She might conclude that it was necessary either to mute her response and so prove that she had evolved to a

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superior level or, inversely, to counterfeit ecstasies she was no longer able to feel spontaneously. But would she manage either convincingly, and, in any case, would she be able to escape an awkward self-consciousness ever after? It may be that the evolution described in the poem toward maturity and sobriety arrives on schedule; if so, reading this poem may have accelerated the process. Was Dorothy satisfied by the outcome? Unanswerable questions, and yet there is a distinct possibility that the poem introduced a rift, however small, in the Wordsworths' relationship. I've always been puzzled by Dorothy Wordsworth's complete silence concerning the visit to Tintern Abbey. Her journals stop after the Wordsworths leave Alfoxden and don't resume until the boat trip to Germany. You could say that the dirt and noise of Bristol failed to inspire her, but of course urban discomforts were interrupted by the tour of the Wye, which ought to have offered Dorothy Wordsworth any number of happily recordable impressions. Biographers have also noted with surprise that during her visit to Mary and Thomas Hutchinson in 1826, she went on an excursion that came within eight miles of Tintern Abbey but didn't bother to revisit it. All her journals say is, "Tintern given up on account of distance." Did the Abbey stir up negative associations, dating back to the composition of the poem? If in fact it was the occasion of a misunderstanding between brother and sister, so sensitive an observer as Wordsworth would have noticed and perhaps seen himself in the wrong. The sadness of the Lucy poems is a real sadness and suggests that something closer to hand than fiction stands behind it. We need not be experts in the "creative process" to understand that the causes of emotion in a poet are not necessarily limited to those stated directly, especially when events and persons in a given poem have no surface correspondence to the facts of the author's life.

Wordsworth's mourning the loss of an earlier self doesn't end with either "Tintern Abbey," "There was a Boy," or the Lucy series. The sense of loss is taken up again in the "Intimations" Ode, just as it inaugurates the narrative of the first part of *The Prelude.* And there are others, such as "Peele Castle." The special feature of "Tintern Abbey" is its conclusion, an address to the "dear Friend," the poet's sister, for whom these lines will be in future years a reminder of a privileged moment. At a more general level, the addressee is meant to serve as a representative

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for the poet's audience. The first reader of the poem was Wordsworth's actual sister, but all subsequent readers may, allegorically, step into her shoes as Wordsworth's "dear Friend," in whom the love of nature persists for a while. Reading the poem may then prove to be the first step in a gradual weaning away from natural ecstasies toward "sober maturity." It's interesting to see how Wordsworth, even when he begins to imagine a future at the end of the poem, still presumes that his companion will be looking back to their time together, using the feelings brought on by retrospective contemplation to help her bear the sorrows that the future will bring, including the death of her brother. But for the moment, the poet allows himself to count on the addressee as a vessel of unreflective joy and so rekindle embers of part of his past experience. It is a kind of spiritual betrothal performed in the cathedral (or abbey) of nature, where the surroundings are made holy by the pact sworn in them, the pastoral landscapes "More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake."

Am I being too much a stickler when I point out that the syntax of this sentence is awkward? The sense intended is that the landscapes are "Dear in themselves and even more so for thy sake." That is a line of hexameter, not pentameter, true; but Wordsworth could have found one or added another line that would have expanded his meaning. The solecism of the last line witnesses to the poet's uneasiness here. He's not really certain that the landscape is dearer to him now than it was before. And if it is dearer, he isn't certain whether the credit should go to his sister, to a new personal identity that has "elevated thoughts," or to an increased awareness of a spirit that rolls through all of Nature without actually being fused with her. Awkward syntax aside, what Wordsworth *consciously* wished us to hear him saying is clear: At the moment of composition, he wanted to give the impression that a new dispensation had gone into effect and that loss would not have the final word.

Wordsworth is the bard of "once again." In the "Intimations" Ode we notice that the word "recollection" is used in the title, one of those words prefixed with "re-," like "revisit" that are so central to this poet's imaginative habits. Much the same conflict as in "Tintern Abbey" makes up the substance of the "Intimations" Ode, which also considers the problem of the poet's relationship to nature. But the metaphysical perspective is cosmic rather than

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autobiographical, and the lapse of time bridged by memory is greater. Although Wordsworth begins by looking backwards as far as childhood, he does not stop there. Instead, he stretches his retrospective faculties to the utmost in order to reach a memory or an intimation of life before birth. In contrast to "Tintern Abbey," historical and geographical fact has been banished from this poem. All we know is that it is spring, the month of May, in some pastoral setting that could just as easily be the Mediterranean or the Holy Land (with its lambs and notional tabors) as Cumberland. Description is here at its most general and archetypal. There are flowers and birds, but none are identified as to variety or species, except the pansy, which with its upper-case first letter and its derivation from French *pensées*, has also been abstracted into a concept. Nor does the poem conclude with an address to a "dear Friend" or sister. The poet speaks to himself and to the wide world.

Nature in this Ode is seen again as both a detractor from and an enhancer of the life of the soul. "She"—for Nature is feminine here as well—is the Earth, a "homely Nurse," who "doth all she can / To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man, / Forget the glories he hath known, / And that imperial palace whence he came." Attributing these damaging ministrations to a character named "Earth" helps avoid, on the level of word-choice at least, a too-naked condemnation of Nature, but obviously Earth is still Nature, an agent held responsible for the gradual attenuation of heavenly memories. Wordsworth's introductory note tells us that at least two years elapsed between the writing of the poem's first four stanzas and the remainder. To end the poem with the question "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" would have been a depressive conclusion, an epitaph of one poet's imagination. Baleful as it is, close attention to the poem up to this death-knell anticipates just such a misfortune. If we bother to reread "My Heart Leaps Up," the nine-line poem from which the opening motto is taken, we see that the motto consists of the last three lines:

> My heart leaps up when I behold
> A rainbow in the sky:
> So was it when my life began;

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So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
  Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

We know that this poem was written in 1802, the day before the Great Ode was begun. Moreover, in the 1815 edition of his poems, Wordsworth put "My Heart Leaps Up" first in the volume, as he placed the "Intimations" Ode last, with, of course, the lyric's opening three lines as a motto. The two have to be considered as a linked pair, then—but why? First, because the Ode recounts the death of sensibility being warded off in the small lyric. Stanza II of the Ode begins with a mention of the Rainbow and concludes with the statement "But yet I know, where'er I go / That there hath passed away a glory from the earth." The feared demise has indeed come. Stanza III, though, attempts to repair the damage this way: "To me alone there came a thought of grief: / A timely utterance gave that thought relief, / And I again am strong: / The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep; / No more shall grief of mine the season wrong. . . ." Many scholars argue that the "timely utterance" intended is the "My Heart Leaps Up" lyric. If true, that is strange, considering that the lyric predicts a spiritual death now understood as having occurred. In any case, stanza IV concludes with insistent thoughts of loss, "something that is gone," and the terrible questions as to the absence of the visionary gleam. For two years Wordsworth is unable to continue writing the "Intimations" Ode.

The talisman that allows him to resume the poem with a fifth section is a discussion of birth and the theory of a pre-existence the lasting influence of which lends beauty and radiance to all that the child sees. But only for a while: "At length the Man perceives it die away / And fade into the common light of day."

Stanzas VI, VII, VIII, and IX describe this process from different angles, imposing it on another child in VIII (presumably Hartley Coleridge is the model), but then returning again to the speaker's own psyche in IX. It is this part that has required the most commentary—another way of saying that it is the most perplexing. The opening quatrain brings in confusion straight off by

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asserting that there is something in our "embers" that still lives, "That nature yet remembers / What was so fugitive!" Odd, because we had understood that it was the *soul*, the supernatural part of us that remembered. Here, "nature" is written in lower case, as nowhere else in the poem. Does Wordsworth mean "human nature"? That is plausible, and yet farther on comes the line "High instincts before which our mortal Nature / Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised. . . ." Here Nature is written in upper case, even though it means ourselves, even though it is being contrasted with questionings, instincts, and affections portrayed as superior to anything in *external* Nature. That the gerunds "obstinate questionings," "fallings from us, vanishings; / Blank misgivings" are presented as part of this divine mode of apprehension also gives pause both by their vagueness and by their generally negative character. To beautiful landscapes should we prefer questionings, fallings, vanishings, and misgivings? The poem does not say why, but the inference is that these motions of the spirit are part of the soul's divine task of setting itself apart from unreflective Nature. In any case, the shifting ground and vacillations of this section of the poem make it difficult always to be certain that we understand the relationships being adumbrated between Nature, the soul, youth, and age. I go back to an earlier statement in favor of Wordsworth's representing the ambivalence and conflict that he actually felt rather than revising them out in order to present a speciously coherent argument. What he offers is not a philosophical memoir, but one more instance of his abiding theme, "the growth of a poet's mind," with all attendant second thoughts and emotional waywardness.

Unfolding, crisis, recovery: a tripartite model for many of Wordsworth's poems has been proposed, one that is difficult to quarrel with, the more so in that it corresponds as well to the phases of his life in the form of joyful youth, troubled manhood, and sober maturity—or, we may say, unreflective fusion with Nature, estrangement from Nature, and a final phase involving an imaginative *return* to Nature. In the poet's return, which is a mark of his maturity, Nature is being reaffirmed, but from a superior plane. Value is lent *to* material reality by the spirit, and not the reverse. This revaluation makes up the substance of the Ode's final two parts, both of which begin with outright commands addressed to parts of an external world: "Then sing, ye birds. . . ."

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and "O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, / Forebode not any severing of our loves!" Wordsworth's directives are not given here, as in "Tintern Abbey," to a dear friend or beloved sister, but to a receptive Nature, to which the speaker has an inspiriting relationship. Some of Wordsworth's best-known affirmations are found in these two parts, and here the sought-after maturity does appear, with reconciliation and serenity in hand.

Apart from the prefatory note Wordsworth gave to the Ode, he has also provided a useful parallel commentary in his "Reply to 'Mathetes,'" published in *The Friend* in 1809. It makes no explicit reference to the Ode but even so gives a clear exposition of the tripartite development on which the poem is based.

> Granted that the sacred light of childhood is and must be for him no more than a remembrance. He may, notwithstanding, be remanded to nature, and with trustworthy hopes, founded less upon his sentient than upon his intellectual being; to nature, as leading insensibly to the society of reason and will, as leading back to the wisdom of nature. A reunion, in this order accomplished, will bring reformation and timely support; and the two powers of reason and nature, thus reciprocally teacher and taught, may advance together in a track to which there is no limit.[2]

He concedes a bit farther on that "the way to knowledge shall be long, difficult, winding, and oftentimes returning upon itself." One inference that we may draw, not only from these passages but also from the return of this crisis pattern in Wordsworth's poems, is that the process must be undergone again and again: It is cyclical. Wordsworth lends a mythic grandeur to that eternal return in another passage from his "Essay Upon Epitaphs":

> As, in sailing upon the orb of this planet, a voyage toward the regions where the sun sets, conducts gradually to the quarter where we have been accustomed to behold it come forth at its rising; and, in like manner, a voyage towards the east, the birth-place in our imagination of the morning, leads finally to the quarter where the sun is last seen when he departs from our eyes; so the contemplative Soul, travelling in the direction of mortality, advances to the country of everlasting life; and, in like manner, may she continue to explore those cheerful

[2] *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser (Oxford, 1974), Volume II, p. 16.

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> tracts till she is brought back, for her advantage and benefit, to the land of transitory things—of sorrow and of fears.

This passage stands as a pertinent gloss for lines in the Ode such as "The sunshine is a glorious birth"; "The Soul that rises with us, our life's star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar"; "The Youth, who daily farther from the east / Must travel, still is Nature's Priest / And by the vision splendid / Is on his way attended"; and, finally, "The Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality." This last example points toward a secondary meaning in the word "setting" as used in the second passage, where Wordsworth asserts that our souls have had a previous setting elsewhere. The process of birth and death is cyclical; it will recur from life to life, and within the span of one life. The child is father to the man who is in turn father to the child, and so on. Perhaps now we can see why Wordsworth placed "My Heart Leaps Up" at the beginning of his works, and the "Intimations" Ode at the conclusion. The reader is invited to follow his first encounter with the poems by any number of subsequent rereadings, just as his life is expected to recapitulate the pattern of unfolding, loss, and recovery as outlined by Wordsworth in single poems and in the arc of his whole oeuvre.

I commented earlier on the ahistorical, mythic character that this poem shows. Mythic and, in fact, biblical, with the mention of rainbows, lambs, tabors, and shepherds: In this context another terminology for Wordsworth's tripartite imaginative development may also apply, this one drawn from Christian theology. At the level of myth his experience can be understood as Incarnation in Nature, Death and Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecostal return in the Spirit. Thinking of matters this way helps account for more than the presence of lambs and shepherds and the birth of the sun. It adds dimension to the section on birth and childhood, and the insistent repetition of the word "glory" can be connected to the "gloria in excelsis Deo" of the angels in Luke's Gospel. It helps account for extraordinary apostrophes to the child as "Mighty Prophet! Seer blest! . . . Thou little child, yet glorious in the might / Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height. . . ." Frances Ferguson has described the poem as a "nativity ode" for the poet himself and for all who appropriate its

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insights. The analogies to sacred story can be carried farther still. The Rainbow in stanza II may remind us of the covenant God made with Noah, and so of the new covenant established by the Incarnation and Crucifixion. Such a context would help explain the otherwise mysterious "Tree, of many, one," that speaks, in stanza IV, of something gone. Christian tradition has often figured the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as a forerunner of the "tree" on which Jesus died. In the poem's Christological patterning, death corresponds to the loss of immediate connection to Nature and the resulting sorrow, the state of affairs at the end of stanza IV. The one fact mentioned in the poem, however, is that we are in the month of May, in which at least some of the fifty days of Easter season always fall. The feasts of Ascension and Pentecost may also come in this month. In eighteenth-century generic usage, a "great Ode" was almost always concerned with ecstasy and the ascent of a godlike figure. In this poem Wordsworth suggests a comparable ascension, but he offers as well a return. Certainly the mood of the concluding stanzas, with their singing birds and sunlit meadows, is Pentecostal, reminding us of the mighty winds of the Spirit and the resultant sense of a new creation of the earth. A purely epitaphic poem then has been avoided. The stone has been rolled away, and death is not final; the dove of the spirit is allowed its excursion. If the poet then sends his spirit back down to earth, the generosity of that act perhaps finds its source in the insights that "spring from human suffering." Wordsworth's retrospective habits of mind then are being applied cosmically, at the level of myth. Just as stanza V of the poem recalled a divine abode before birth, these concluding lines recollect life as it was before a mythic death, and Wordsworth travels back along the retrospective path to a world that need not after all be forever lost.

It's true that Wordsworth, from the threshold of Dove Cottage, proposes to join the happy throng only "in thought." Thought is the word that governs the latter part of the poem, returning in several repetitions right up through the last line. It replaces the insistent "glory" and "dream" of the earlier phase. Wordsworth returns to Nature and the human family by means of a mental faculty, a hermit-like presence, preparing, as we know, a larger-scale account of his development in a tripartite poem to be called "The Recluse." The project was never completed, and Words-

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worth instead placed the "Intimations" Ode as the final poem in his collected works. An imaginative way to conceive of these matters is to see all the texts—whether published or left purely internal—that Wordsworth's readers have produced in response to him as that book he himself did not write, a Pentecostal speaking in tongues in verse and prose engendered by the body of his utterance. This fits if we overlook an important difference. Whereas Pentecost and Ascension came only after Jesus' death, Wordsworth would not until 1850 be out of nature. Those later decades saw an industrious outpouring of poems mature and reasonable but, oh dear, mostly unreadable. The poetry repairman in me wants to time-travel back to the early 1800s and say to him, "Poet! You're only in your thirties—not old enough yet to go gentle into that good night! That Pentecost is for you as well as all the rest! Hold forth! More tongues, more fire, more life!"

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R. S. GWYNN

Cléante to Elmire

Rising, Madame, towards heaven in a bed
That elevates my knees and lifts my head
To sustenance, that is, a plastic tray
Of Jell-O, applesauce, and consommé,
I have become a connoisseur of juice,
Which leaves me liquid, not to mention *loose*,
And keeps my precious fluids running clear
Until such time as I shall disappear—
Like what descends transparently for pain,
Dripping, *ex machina*, to tubes that drain.
What has, you may well ask, contributed
To this apostrophe to one long dead
From one so nearly so? You come to me,
As Sting might say, in *synchronicity*;
Searching just now for bulletins about
This storm called *Cara* which, I have no doubt,
Shall live up to its namesake, namely *you*,
And do us in before the day is through,
I channel-surfed and lit on PBS.
My dear, shall I be coy and make you guess
What stopped me there and brought a hurricane
And you into one focus in my brain?
One line, in Mr. Wilbur's fine translation:
And cultivate a sober moderation. . . .
Think of it! If we ever needed proof
Of greater patterns, wasn't it *Tartuffe*
That brought us once and brings us now together—
Molière and two lost souls and raging weather?
Lord, twenty years have passed and still each line
Smacks tartly on the tongue like a good wine
Heady with epigram and foiled seduction.

It was The Coastal Players' great production—
Rhymed verse they said our audience could not

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Make much of, let alone digest the plot—
Yet how we triumphed, I the *raisonneur*
Cléante and you the faithful spouse, the pure
Elmire, the model of a perfect wife.
So much for art. Who says it mirrors life?
Like leaves whirling outside, the years have flown
And taken with them Pernelle and Orgon.
Dorine the maid (Remember? What a bitch!)
Went into real estate and came out rich,
Sweet Marianne had children and grew fat,
And you'd have thought it less than fitting that
The charge against Tartuffe, so like the play's,
Was finally dropped: not only virtue pays.
In spite of the applause I found so sweet
I never found the courage to repeat
Those evenings' glories in another play.
And you? We gathered you were on your way
To greater things. A touring company
(*A Chorus Line*!) had called, you gushed to me
At the cast party, and our toasts went on
(Fuck "sober moderation"!) until dawn,
When I appeared, bedraggled, in your gown—
My coming out, no small thing in this town—
Battering Blanche against your not-so-manly
Peruked and powdered parody of Stanley
While Matt, your surly boyfriend, hulked and glared.
You laughed at him. I must say *I* was scared.

After that night our paths diverged. I learned
Your offers never came, heard that you'd turned
To wilder exploits, but, then, I was so
Into my own pursuits I didn't know
How dark your path became. Often our cars
Would pass en route to our respective bars.
We'd honk and wave like drunken teens. Dare I
Hope that one kiss I blew you said good-bye?
Your end came the next summer. Tom, the cop
Who'd played Laurent, came by the flower shop
To tell me what he knew—in rapid order,
Marriage, your panicked calls—quick as the border
Of this new storm front alters. Drugs, of course,

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Were much of it, and there was the divorce
Which had turned ugly. Still, the Lord knows what
Led to that final beating and the shot
That tore your face away—before Matt made
The 911 call, sobbing while he played
His own death scene. I only pray it's true
What Tom believed himself: he said that you
Were dead already when the shot was fired.

My own death is the kind that is "acquired,"
Which makes it sound like something one might paste
Into a book, as one "acquires" a taste
For sherry, leather scenes, or the ballet.
All prance around the piper. All must pay.
No more of that. The plot by now is stale.
Let Tony Kushner live to tell the tale
And garner all the money and awards.
May *my* audition be one aiming towards
A long run somewhere in a stellar cast
In which no bow I take will be my last.
Corny? You know me, Cara, for I am
The same as you, eternally a ham
Who holds out hopes of One who can explain,
A *Raisonneur* of happiness and pain,
Who proves for us that love is possible
And need not climax in so great a fall
As what we've suffered . . . and that The Machine
Will lower with a Prince who makes us clean
And whole again, who lends His grace
To salve my wreckage and restore your face—
Who lets the memory of a dead friend's laugh,
In the dark valley, be my rod and staff.
In a world full of such unwelcome guests
As storms, Tartuffe, and sickness, small requests.

It makes a curious *dénouement* that I,
Too ill for anything except to die,
May be evacuated, which shall save
These sodden relics for a drier grave.
The winds are rising, Cara, your own winds
With the great closing curtain that descends

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Upon us as we play our games again
With tracking charts and crayons. CNN
Leads the hour with your great whirling eye.
Live oaks and sweetgums just outside my high
Window gesticulate the *agon* for us
As fiercely as a Sophoclean chorus.
The living board their windows, and their eyes
Lift past their fragile rooflines to the skies.
What wind is this? they ask themselves.
I say
It is the wind that bears the world away.

1969

for Ty

A dim-lit, smoky bar. Your twenty-first
Birthday has brought a golden Benrus watch,
A marriage, a degree, a double Scotch—
None of which will quite satisfy your thirst.

It's after one. The pianist is playing
Procul Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale."
You scuff your side-zip boots along the rail
And neither think of leaving nor of staying.

Why bring it back again? Surely you know
Your future guns his engine at the door,
And soon enough he'll steer an exit for
A suburb where you have no wish to go.

Why bring it back? Because you want me to.
Because you want to light your cigarette,
Clutching a scene which you cannot forget
Where everything you gaze upon is new.

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JAMES APPLEWHITE

Charles

Charles remained my special friend, brown kid
I'd played with beside the station when he was
ten and I eleven. The vacant lot between his house
and our Esso pumps kept oil they dumped

in its hollows. But weeds scattered up the hill of our castle
where we huddled behind a parapet that crumbled
like brown sugar. The dirt rested thin and washed-over so
that fennels rose singly, in feathers,

that we could crawl between, not staining our knees.
We strung oil cans on wires and pulled them for wheels,
then sat on the five-quart ones for stools, or thrones. The last
little oil that we trickled into bottle caps

resembled molasses. We pretended to drink it—dark amber
and syrupy but not a color to stain you. Charles' house
felt sparse when he fed us soda crackers spread with mustard.
We understood not to be seen together

too much, by my father or Charles' mother. We'd lie back
and talk in the back seat of a Buick, or Cadillac, waiting
shiny and empty for its owner. We'd stay low, knowing not
to track sand on the upholstery or carpet.

Charles and I kept in touch for years, seeing each other
when I'd be working the station at night, late,
lounging before closing up, on piled tires beside the hydraulic
jack, near water cans and the lug wrench.

He'd sit on the bench with a beer in a paper sack
from Rooster's Esso across the street and we'd talk,
almost like before. I didn't drink yet, but had a girl.
We thought pretty much the same

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about things. He knew I didn't like to make the black
guys take a paper cup to drink from the electric
cooler, so we'd both lounge there sipping and talking,
nights, without ever mentioning the issue.

I saw him only a few times after I started college.
That last summer I worked the station, I knew he'd
been away and returned. He'd learned welding
in a shipyard in Norfolk and spoke

with not quite the same accent. When he paid for the packs
of gum and condoms, I noticed that his right thumb
was gone. Answering the look in my eyes, he said,
"That was before. That was the sawmill."

So I remembered he'd handled lumber, just across the road,
when I was a senior in high school. "It was my start.
My first hard work," he said. "Same as my dad," I said.
"But he lost the ends of his fingers

here, in the belt of the compressor." His eyes glowed chocolate-
rich, shiny with intelligence. "I reckon I'll go
back up there, and work for the government." He smiled.
"But I'll miss Saturday nights down here."

His nub thumb squeezed my own thumb's knuckle
like the secret handshake of a club. This initiation
feels firmer as the years pass—like that day in D.C.
seven years ago, when I swear I saw

his eyes and head in the black man crossing a street,
hunched, wearing the embers of hope in the burnt-
looking cloth that hooded his face like a monk's.
Charles, our trust is gone—that equal

look, man to man. That is what I mourn, my friend,
as I reach for my wallet on M Street—for the sad alms
that never atone for our loss. These men have all their
thumbs. I never shake their hands.

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BRUCE BAWER

André Gide, Evangelist

Reading Alan Sheridan's compendious new biography of André Gide can be rather like spending a few days in Paris.[1] Or maybe it just seems that way to me, because shortly after reading *André Gide: A Life in the Present*, I did, in fact, spend a few days in Paris, where every part of town brought to mind a different aspect of Gide's life.

So it was that, strolling past the pricey emporia on the rue Saint-Honoré, I thought of Gide the privileged young man, who, during his European and African travels, grew accustomed to having a piano delivered to him wherever he was staying; walking through the elegant neighborhoods of Beaubourg and St-Germain-des-Prés, I contemplated Gide the respectable upper-class householder; wandering around parts of Montmartre and Batignolles where the streets were jammed with Arab immigrants, I was reminded of Gide's affection for North Africa and its inhabitants (or, at least, the more comely and cooperative of its underage male inhabitants). The sight of imposing churches such as Notre Dame and Sacré-Coeur recalled Gide's lifelong attempt to define a Christianity consistent with his own sense of morality and at odds with that of the influential *entre deux guerres* Action Française movement, whose leaders' ardent traditionalist Catholicism eventually led them to become zealous Nazi collaborators; the spectacle of the Place de la Concorde, the Champs de Mars, the Invalides, and other overblown public spaces that boast of French power and glory caused me to dwell on Gide's high-profile involvement in national politics and his intimacy with the likes of Léon Blum and Charles de Gaulle. In the narrow streets of the Left Bank, I remembered Gide the counterculture author; sipping drinks at gay bars on the rue de Sainte-Croix de la

[1] ANDRÉ GIDE: A Life in the Present, by *Alan Sheridan*. Harvard University Press. $35.00.

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Bretonnerie, I pondered Gide the trailblazing supporter of homosexual rights.

And then there were the street names. In every corner of Paris, I came across them: thoroughfares, big and small, named after literary men (no women) who had figured in Gide's life, some as faithful friends, others as devoted enemies. Near the Arc de Triomphe was the rue Paul Valéry, named after the poet whom Gide met when he was twenty-one and Valéry a law student two years his junior (and about whom he later wrote a critical study); alongside the Champs-Elysées was the allée Marcel Proust, named for the writer whom Gide viewed (in Sheridan's words) as "a social-climbing snob" and whose masterpiece Gide, to his later regret, rejected for possible excerpting in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*; and on my way out of the city, I passed the rue Jean Cocteau, named for the colleague and rival whom Gide considered a flashy, untrustworthy phony and on whom he modeled a character in *The Counterfeiters.* (There's also a rue André Gide—it's in Montparnasse—but I didn't happen to make it to that part of town.)

Seeing Gide, as it were, all over Paris underscored for me—as if one could ever forget—how supremely *French* was the life that Alan Sheridan recounts in this highly intelligent, comprehensive, and fluently written seven-hundred-page tome. For better or worse, other countries just don't produce authors like Gide—or, more accurately, don't have cultures in which a life and career and reputation like Gide's can happen. It's probably fair to say that France itself doesn't have such a culture anymore, either. Which is one reason, I think, why Sheridan's book is valuable: it offers a richly detailed look at a world that no longer exists, one in which a wealthy and well-connected young man who spurned the successful career that he might well have claimed in law or business or politics in favor of a life dedicated to the good, the true, and the beautiful (as he saw them) ended up enjoying a fame and influence that any politician or businessman would envy and that no serious writer today—certainly no serious American writer—could imagine possessing.

And what a supporting cast! By the end of Sheridan's book almost everyone who was anyone in European letters during Gide's lifetime seems to have put in an appearance—from Stephane Mallarmé to Joseph Conrad, from Henry James to

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Aldous Huxley. Then there's Cocteau, who, in Sheridan's telling, weaves in and out of Gide's life like a snake. Gide considered Cocteau morally dangerous, and the contrast in *The Counterfeiters* between the popular, flamboyant, and superficial writer the Count de Passavant and the more serious, moral, and unflashy writer Edouard, both of whom are attracted to a handsome and gifted youth named Olivier, was influenced by Gide's own struggle (at a distance) with Cocteau for the discipleship of Marc Allégret. Allégret, who became Gide's lover when he was sixteen and Gide was forty-eight, thereafter fell briefly under the spell of Cocteau, who Gide feared would "corrupt" Marc. Writes Sheridan: "For Gide, with his cult of sincerity, Cocteau represented cultivated insincerity, outward show, showing-off, parade. . . . It was not to be confused with the kind of 'immoralism' that he had himself entertained (without entirely adopting): such a post-Protestant, Nietzschean 'immoralism' was, effectively, a 'higher' morality, one that must be preached with all the ardour of the Protestant missionary."

Indeed, as Sheridan convincingly argues, Gide never stopped being, in his own way, a Protestant missionary. Certainly he never disavowed Christianity, which he saw, in Sheridan's words, "as a humane, loving creed that had been perverted, in similar and different ways, by both Protestantism and Catholicism." As Gide himself wrote in 1912: "Catholicism is unacceptable. Protestantism is intolerable. And I feel profoundly Christian." He continued throughout his life to consider himself a Christian—by which he meant not that he believed in certain dogmas about God and Christ but that the person and ministry of Jesus held great significance for him. This, in his view, was not inconsistent with the kind of "immorality" he professed; on the contrary, it obliged one to question and challenge conventional morality in the name of a more truly Christian—which is to say, a more loving, generous, and honest—approach to life, even if that meant being widely branded as immoral. The running theme in his fiction is the conflict between the inhuman strictures imposed by traditional Christian culture and the deeply human longing for a life unfettered by pointless self-denial and hypocrisy, and, especially, for the uninhibited physical expression of love. In the 1909 novella *Strait Is the Gate*, a young woman's inability to break free of religious strictures causes her to reject the love that has flowered

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between her and her cousin; in *Symphonie Pastorale* (1919) a married pastor's world is turned upside down when he develops a romantic attachment to a blind orphan girl whom he has taken into his home.

There is much to be said for these and most of Gide's other major works of fiction: they are seriously conceived and very well-made, with classical contours and an exemplary purity of language and consistency of tone. Yet they are also too obviously designed as critical commentaries on the social climate and religious morality of Gide's time—and, as such, can seem as quaint to contemporary readers as they once seemed revolutionary. Even to admirers of well-made fiction, moreover, much of Gide's fiction can seem lapidary to the point of lifelessness. Too often the observed characters come off like stiff actors reciting lines and following script cues. As for the narrators, they are unbelievable except, it sometimes seems, to the degree that they are recognizable versions of Gide himself; in fact one has the impression that the only times these stories do come alive is when Gide is more or less transcribing his own experiences. Also problematic is his use of awkward structural devices, such as the placement of the main story within a framing narrative that is attributed to a different narrator. Sheridan, who generally takes a highly sensible view of almost every question relating to Gide's life and work, is rather more enthusiastic than I am about the structural devices in Gide and about his narrators' frequent references to the narration as such. Sheridan (who has written books about Derrida and Foucault) admires Gide's use of such techniques because they call attention to the artificiality of narrative conventions; I dislike it for the same reason. The fact is that Gide's perfect little fictions already feel artificial enough.

The major exception to these generalizations about Gide's fiction is *The Counterfeiters* (1926). Gide considered it his only novel, and it is true that while several of his other works, though perhaps long enough to be called novels, read more like short stories, *The Counterfeiters* alone has a novelistic heft, complexity, and messiness. Indeed, it is every bit as meandering as Gide's other major fiction is overly tidy—which is hardly surprising, given that one of his purposes in writing this book was to break free of the structural rigidity of his shorter, more "perfect" works and to let himself be directed less by his themes than by his

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characters. Unfortunately, the result is a scattered, highly uneven narrative that wanders hither and yon, now following the fortunes of an engaging character (such as the gifted Olivier, a new lycée graduate taking his first steps into the Parisian literary scene), and now attending at length to a character who does not even rise off the page. Gide's rambling structure reflects his desire not just to portray a single individual but to take the reader on a tour of certain segments of Parisian society at a certain historical moment (with an emphasis on their various sexual hypocrisies). He is, to a considerable extent, successful; but to compare this, arguably Gide's *chef d'oeuvre*, with other, similarly motivated books of the same era such as *A la recherche du temps perdu* or *Ulysses* is to be forced to recognize Gide's relative limitations as a novelist.

On the one hand Gide is unable, in *The Counterfeiters*, to disguise the fact that the characters here who most strongly interest him tend to be boys and the men who are attracted to them; on the other hand, his disinclination to be identified too strongly with those characters, and his desire to paint a broader social portrait, would seem to be among the reasons why he gives short shrift to the characters that most truly engage his imagination, continually dropping them in order to see what his other, less interesting creations are up to. One can only wish that Gide had been able, thematically, to follow fully his obsessions, and, structurally, to find some happy middle ground between *The Counterfeiters*' unsatisfying lack of shape and focus and the deadening facticity and overdetermination of his shorter fiction. But he never did. Though he was considered the pre-eminent French author of his time, to read Gide's major fictional works is to conclude that his gifts and vocation were essentially those not of a fiction writer but of a pamphleteer against conventional sexual morality. Which is, of course, just another way of acknowledging that he was, indeed, an evangelist.

Gide did not become an evangelist overnight. Born in 1869 and left fatherless at the age of ten, he grew after his father's death extremely close to his mother, whose stern, straitlaced Protestantism caused Gide—who recognized early on that he was homosexual—to spend much of his young manhood battling a profound internalized sexual moralism. In his early twenties he wrote in his journal (in a self-dramatizing tone consistent with much of the poetry of the day), "O God, let this over-narrow morality burst

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and let me live, oh, fully; and give me the strength to do so, oh without fear, and without always thinking that I am about to sin! . . . I have to strive after pleasure. I find it painful to be happy." He owed his liberation from "this over-narrow morality" at least partly to his friendship with Oscar Wilde, then in his heyday, whose example of flamboyant and unapologetic homosexuality, Sheridan notes, helped "to accelerate an intellectual and emotional movement away from the Christian puritanism of his youth," and about whom he would later publish a full-length critical study—a brave act at a time (1910) when Wilde was still a figure of disgrace.

Not too many months after writing the above journal entry, Gide finally experienced both homosexual and heterosexual sex. Though his English-language publishers omitted from his published account of an 1893 African trip a paragraph describing the former event—a paragraph which, Sheridan notes, "is quite central to Gide's account of his emancipation from his puritan upbringing"—Gide wrote of the latter encounter in the following vein:

> I felt that I was beginning to live again; it even seemed as if I were living for the first time; I had left the valley of the shadow of death and was awakening to real life. Yes, I was entering upon a new existence where every joy would be welcome and none resisted . . . I heard, I saw, I breathed as I had never done before; and as the profusion of sounds, scents and colours flooded my empty heart, I felt it melt in gratitude.
>
> "Take me, take me body and soul," I cried, sobbing out my worship to some unknown Apollo. "I am thine, obedient, submissive. Let all within me be light! Light and air! My struggle against thee has been in vain. But now I know thee. Thy will be done! I am in thy hands. Take me!"

As this overheated, self-dramatizing passage might suggest, Gide, like many former prisoners of fundamentalism, did not exactly throw off the yoke of fanatical faith and become a rationalist, but rather redirected his religious passions, exchanging one object of extreme, irrational devotion for another. In his case, in short, the Calvinist god of sexual deprivation gave way to a pagan god of sexual satisfaction. From that time onward, Gide pursued carnal pleasures with well-nigh religious zeal. Utterly incapable of deny-

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ing himself physical gratification, he seems to have been blind to the quite obvious ways in which his self-indulgence hurt others.

Leading the list of those whom he hurt was his wife, Madeleine, his marriage to whom remains perhaps the single most perplexing fact of Gide's biography. Madeleine was his first cousin, and their marriage, which endured for forty-three years, was never consummated. Engaged to him seventeen days after his mother's death, when he was twenty-five, Madeleine seems to have been less of a wife to Gide than a mother substitute. Three months after their wedding, Gide confided to his journal: "How often when Madeleine is in the next room, I forget that she is not my mother!" As Sheridan comments, this confusion "lasted all their lives." Certainly Gide and Madeleine could hardly have been more different. If he was a footloose adventurer with an enthusiasm for the company of friends, an animus toward the institutional church, and a passion for boys, she was a shy, private homebody for whom sex itself—let alone "boy-love"—was an embarrassing, unmentionable topic; throughout their marriage she avoided reading those works by her husband which she knew would reveal to her more about his life apart from her than she wished to know. And there was plenty not to know: from the beginning of their marriage, Gide lived largely apart from her, traveling around Europe and Africa for months at a time with Allégret and other friends, having sex with countless strangers along the way and dropping in on Madeleine occasionally in much the way that an adult man would drop in on—yes—his mother.

Why did Gide marry Madeleine? Plainly he cherished his freedom—yet he also apparently wanted a wife who would hold down the fort, representing the domestic virtues and conventional piety, while he was off gallivanting. Insensitive? Yes. Cruel? Undoubtedly. Yet Gide seems not to have realized he was being cruel. It was as if in some sense Madeleine wasn't real to him, as if he had a blind spot where she was concerned, as if her chief purpose, in his eyes, was to enable him to deny to himself, on some level, the reality of his life and to reassure himself that he was in some sense still a "normal," respectable, loving husband.

If questions about Gide's marriage to Madeleine seem to be of primary relevance to any inquiry into his understanding of human affairs, the central event of that marriage was undoubtedly

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Madeleine's burning, in 1918, of all of Gide's letters to her. She destroyed them alone and without drama, not informing Gide about it until he asked one day to inspect her epistolary trove. Gide, who later described the letters as "the treasure of my life, the best of me," claimed he had wept for a week, "from morning till evening," on learning of their destruction. His sorrow, however, seems less that of a wounded lover than that of a typically vain writer. Madeleine's burning of the letters—about which she said "I was suffering too much . . . I had to do something . . . they were the most precious thing I had"—was plainly a pathetic act, at once sadistic and masochistic, by a desperate and helpless woman with very little self-regard, absolutely no sense of her own power to change her life, and only one means (as she apparently saw it) of hurting someone who had hurt her more than she could otherwise bring herself to acknowledge.

Yet even this act apparently failed to awaken Gide to the nature and dimensions of his crime against Madeleine. As Sheridan writes, "She had burnt twenty years of letters, but had he not reduced to ashes twenty years of love?" Yet Gide was incapable of seeing things that way. He told his friend the writer Roger Martin du Gard that because he was homosexual he was able to give Madeleine a "total love" that was "divested of all physical desire" and marked by "limitless purity"; in their marriage, he claimed, he had built "the very temple of love." As Sheridan comments, "This is not an intelligent man of 1998 speaking, but it doesn't sound like an intelligent man of 1919 either." What it does sound like is a man who never resolved his inner tensions—and who never entirely shook off a puritanical abhorrence of sex. (Can it be, one wonders, that in focusing his affection on children, Gide was not demonstrating his emancipation from Calvinistic strictures but was rather making a puritan's flight into innocence from adult "sinfulness"?)

Gide characteristically sought to understand himself in terms of warring dualities, one of them being a conflict between Catholicism (his father's religion) and Protestantism (his mother's); but Sheridan, observing perceptively that this very tendency to think dualistically is more Protestant than Catholic, sees Gide as very much a product of French Calvinism. About his 1924 book *Corydon*, a then-scandalous defense of homosexuality, which Gide was brave to write and even braver to publish, Sheridan suggests

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that "perversely, we owe [its] publication to what remained in Gide, and was always to remain in him, of the 'Protestant conscience': he felt compelled to 'bear witness' to the truth as he saw it, a truth, moreover, that concerned him at the very centre of his being." For Gide, Sheridan says, "sincerity was all." To read Sheridan's biography is to believe that this was so—that Gide truly considered himself to be devoted above all to sincerity. Yet at the same time it is to observe that Gide's marriage was, at heart, a lie. Not only did he betray Madeleine with countless boys; he also fathered a daughter, Catherine (born in 1923), by his friend Elisabeth van Rysselberghe, and kept that fact a secret from Madeleine until her death. Then there was his long-term liaison with the aforementioned Marc Allégret, whose father, a Protestant pastor and an old family friend of Gide, trusted him implicitly and apparently never suspected that the famous writer was anything more than a devoted friend and mentor to his son. Yet Marc Allégret had no complaints: Gide, writes Sheridan, "was the most important, most influential person" in Allégret's life; even after Marc grew up, married, and became a famous film director, they remained bound until Gide's death "by an unbreakable bond of mutual love and respect."

Gide's betrayal of his wife and of Pastor Allégret's trust, even as he considered himself to be consecrated to the cause of truth, was not the only important and troubling contradiction in his life. On the one hand he was throughout his career a professed liberal and, for most of the 1930s, was one of the most vocal and visible supporters of Soviet Communism, with its supposed devotion to the interests of the working class. Yet at the same time he was a rich man who, for decades, used his wealth to procure the sexual favors of poor boys. To be sure, none of the boys or their families ever complained about their treatment at Gide's hands; yet to read Sheridan on Gide's encounters with them—which he writes about responsibly and unsensationally, without a hint of either condemnation or celebration—is to get the impression that, for Gide, having a boy sent up to one's room was really not all that different from having a piano delivered.

The irreconcilability of Gide's apparently guiltless exploitation of lower-class youth and his professed sympathy for the so-called workers' revolution is one thing; his self-delusion about that revolution is another. To be sure, his relationship with the

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Moscow regime was, even at its height, complicated by a laudable reluctance to compromise his own art or beliefs. Unlike his fellow writer Louis Aragon, Gide was never a paid Party mouthpiece, though, in his eagerness to believe that Russia was showing the way to the New Jerusalem, he did for a time soft-pedal his criticisms of Stalin and dismiss evidence of Soviet lies and crimes. To read Sheridan's account of the Party's aggressive courtship of Gide, of Aragon's tireless efforts to make him toe the party line, and of Gide's quixotic attempt to maintain personal integrity and speak the truth while still serving as an apologist for a brutal monster of a dictator is to be reminded yet again of how actively Moscow sought to recruit and control influential figures in the West—and of how frighteningly successful that campaign was.

Gide's relationship with the Party reached its climax in 1936, when he stood beside Stalin on a Red Square platform at the funeral of Maxim Gorky; it ended later that same year, when, having finally been compelled by his experiences in Russia to admit his own doubts about Communism, Gide published his book *Retour de l'URSS*. Though it is, as Sheridan says, "a mass of unresolved contradictions . . . written and published in haste by a confused man whose mind was not yet made up," the book's honest expression of disillusionment incensed the government in Moscow, at whose orders the Soviet stooges among the French literati and intelligentsia—of whom there were many—obediently denounced Gide as a liar and a traitor. Thus did Gide find himself hated by colleagues on both the Catholic and fascist right and the Communist left. In the long run, however, he emerged victorious: after the liberation, while other French writers were being imprisoned or executed for having cozied up to the German occupiers, the de Gaulle regime treated Gide almost as a hero (even though the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, on which he had played a key editorial role, was dissolved by the government for having collaborated with the Nazis). It is, then, all the more striking to read about how Gide, after Hitler's invasion of France and the establishment of the puppet Vichy regime in the south, continued on with his life almost as if nothing had happened. Though he did go to some effort to help Jewish friends and acquaintances, it is nonetheless astonishing that Gide—who spent the war years in the south of France and northern Africa—managed to follow his usual work (and play) schedule while the

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Gestapo, too, was hard at work nearby, rounding up Jews. To an American or British reader, such apparent complacency may seem incomprehensible.

If admirers of Gide are obliged to disentangle his problematic political posture during the 1930s and 1940s from the liberalism that characterized his politics before and afterwards, they also have to separate his habitual sexual exploitation of poor children from his pioneering commitment to homosexual rights. *The Immoralist* (1902) and *Corydon* (1924) were two of the first "gay" books I ever read, and when I found my way to them in the 1970s they seemed to me every bit as urgent and relevant as they must have seemed to their first readers. In *The Immoralist,* a young married man very much like Gide travels abroad with his new wife and recognizes his homosexuality (which is elliptically but unambiguously conveyed); in *Corydon*, the narrator addresses a group of friends whom he has called together in order to announce, and defend, his homosexuality. If one book attempts to begin to move homosexuality out of the realm of immorality by recounting a sympathetic character's gradual discovery of his same-sex attraction, the other seeks to accomplish the same end by argumentative means. Both books are commendable in their goals, but *The Immoralist* now seems to me unbearably slow-moving and portentous, while *Corydon* feels considerably more dated than it did a couple of decades ago, when I was a young man beginning to come to terms with my sexual orientation. Yet easy as it might be to mock the herculean lengths to which Gide goes in the latter book to explain and defend something that for many educated people nowadays needs no defense, it must be remembered that *Corydon* itself helped bring about this change of thinking. Besides, in most of the world today, *Corydon* would still be seen not as old hat but as incendiary. Indeed, it is poignant to read both of these books knowing that when Gide wrote them he believed that Western civilization was on the verge of a more enlightened age when homosexuality would be universally accepted, and that all it would take to reach that point was a few good books. But then, such is the optimism that drives all evangelists.

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SYDNEY LEA

Authority

for W.D.W., who wrote *North of Now*

The times were good for him back thirty years;
he must have thought he'd risen above us all,
but they went more than well for us as well.
Chick's was Topsfield's only general store,

and pumped the only gas for miles. The trucks
filled up the lot like milling pachyderms.
Back then of course we thought in different terms:
we never dreamed, say, Chick would have that stroke.

The pumps are gone. Across the road, the Mobil-
Mart shows antiseptic, moony-white.
The loggers—traitors—lunch there day and night,
gaze through breath-gauzed glass to watch Chick's crumble.

A river drew us friends back then: its trout,
its water clear as air. The trout have vanished,
along with some of us. Chick had a flourish
whenever he'd greet our gang. All grins and shouts.

He forgets who we are or else he doesn't care—
just aging guys from a state away, who come
for a bag of chips, for a rusted tin of ham,
for old times' sake. We wander through the store,

buying whatever we can, which isn't much.
Chick's locked in study, cards on the table, locked
in silence too, who above all things would talk
our very ears off when we stopped for lunch.

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For tasty lunch: back then, when moose were thick,
he made himself a killing on steaks and burgers.
He'd wave his flipper and rant on local matters
(though he never let the meat get overcooked):

taxes, timber, a surefire fishing hole.
His face would shine with pure authority,
a different thing from this solemnity.
He'd hoot, opine; opine again, and smile.

Everything tends toward wisdom. Chick's dumb version
looks as grim as ever grim could be.
Friends at his table, he in better days,
the fish, the food: was all of that mere vision?

Outside, we recall how we dubbed him "Mr. Mayor."
Oh please, not that poor man at solitaire.
Full above our river, the moon appears
authoritative. Grins from ear to ear.

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CHARLES MARTIN

Against a Certain Kind of Ardency

1

I know someone so ardent of the past
He finds it hard to let bygones be gone,
And says that since the present will not last,
Yesterday only can be counted on

To offer him the one true paradigm
For keeping bad enough from turning worse.
It isn't that he minds the present time,
If he could just approach it in reverse—

Yet he'd be happy to go on repeating
What has been done (as though such repetition
Were anything but wholly self-defeating),

And seems to be unbothered in the least
That he might lose the present through attrition
By yielding so much ground to the deceased.

2

If I believed that I'd be listened to,
And not accused of soiling his white banner,
I'd offer him a very different view,
Propounded in my best post-modern manner:

I'd argue that the past would be no more
Unless *we* made it—made, by our making,
What *it* could never be mistaken for:
We bring it into being by forsaking

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Its ready consolations and rewards,
And thereby setting it against the new.
And so the *arrières*-and-*avants-gardes*

(So like in every way except direction)
Are both mistaken about what's to do—
Though neither would have need of my correction.

3

A long-dead Roman poet said it better
("Better" will have to do: if I say "best"
I'll lose my argument) in a verse letter
He may have meant for us, though it's addressed

To Augustus Caesar: "Who would not lament
The way we shun the new? If innovation
Had been abhorred by the Greeks to the same extent
That it is by the citizens of *our* nation,

There'd be no ancients for us now to read;
Where, in what trackless wasteland, would we be?"
No ancients without moderns, they agreed.

With Horace, I would argue to the last
Against a certain kind of ardency;
For what, if not the present, makes the past?

Just a Smack at Larkin

You brushed your teeth, you washed your face,
They tucked you in, your mum and dad;
They really weren't all that bad,
They weren't always on your case;

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They were as good as parents got,
Back then, and did the best they knew
With such a whining shit as you;
Were they appreciated? Not!

And you, who will not take a wife
Nor raise up kiddies of your own
Can do no more than bitch and moan!
Get over it, Phil—get a life.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Compartments

Which shall be final?
Pine box in a concrete vault,
urn on a mantel?

Last breath a rattle,
stuffed in a black body bag,
he's zipped head to toe.

At the nursing home,
sides drawn to prevent a fall—
in a crib again.

His dead wife's false teeth
underfoot in their bedroom.
Feel the piercing chill.

Pink flamingo lawn,
a Florida trailer park:
one space he'll avoid.

The box they gave him
on retirement held a watch
that measures decades.

The new bifocals
rest in their satin-lined case,
his body coffined.

Move to the suburbs.
Crowded train at seven-oh-two,
empty head at night.

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New playpen, new crib,
        can't compete with the newness
of the newborn child.

Oak four-poster bed
        inherited from family—
Jack Frost defrosted.

Once he was pink-slipped.
        Dad helped out: "A son's a son,
Son, from womb to tomb."

Fourteen-foot ceilings,
        parquet floors, marble fireplace,
proud first apartment.

The Jack Frost Motel,
        its very name a portent
for their honeymoon.

Backseat of a car,
        cursing the inventor of
nylon pantyhose.

First-job cubicle.
        Just how many years before
a window office?

College quad at noon,
        chapel bells, frat men, coeds,
no pocket money.

His grandfather's barn.
        After it burned to the ground,
the moon filled its space.

His favorite tree—
        the leaves return to branches?
No, butterflies light.

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Closet where he hid
to play with himself. None knew?
Mothball orgasms.

Chimney that he scaled
naked to sweep for his Dad:
Blake's soot-black urchin.

The town's swimming pool
instructor, throwing him in
again and again . . .

Kindergarten play
ground: swings, slides, rings, jungle gym.
Scraped knees, molester.

Red, blue and green birds
mobilize over his crib,
its sides a tall fence.

Two months premature,
he incubates by light bulbs,
like a baby chick.

He is impatient,
curled in foetal position,
floating in darkness.

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TESS LEWIS

Music Was the Food of Love: So Was Architecture, Painting and Verse

It would be "Alma's last fling," her third and final husband, Franz Werfel, remarked with a shrug about the intensity of Alma Mahler-Werfel's relationship with the Roman Catholic priest Johannes Hollnsteiner. When the fifty-three-year-old Alma met Father Hollnsteiner in 1932, her beauty had just begun to fade but her charm remained intact and her rule as Vienna's premier hostess was unchallenged. The city's leading figures—politicians, diplomats, painters, writers, musicians, composers, journalists, and men of the Church—flocked to her salons. Friends, lovers, and husbands dedicated masterpieces to her from all branches of the arts, which she displayed prominently for her guests' edification. Alma had always had an eye for genius. Her marriages to the composer and conductor Gustav Mahler, to Walter Gropius, a founder of the Bauhaus school of architecture, and to the poet and novelist Werfel, and her passionate but short-lived love affair with the Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka, earned her the title of "Muse to the Four Arts," a coveted distinction in a city where art reigned supreme. Hollnsteiner, also, seemed destined for greatness. Handsome, articulate, and a shade too well dressed, he was reputedly next in line to be Vienna's Cardinal.

Now Alma could reap her homage on a new, higher plane. "J.H. presented the Mass to me yesterday, and every word he utters is song to me . . ." she wrote in her diary.[1] She also noted that "Johannes Hollnsteiner is thirty-eight years old and thus far has not met Woman. He is the essence of a priest." Woman met

[1] Quotations from Alma Mahler-Werfel's later diaries are taken from two recent biographies: Susanne Keegan, *The Bride of the Wind* (New York, 1992) and Karen Monson, *Alma Mahler: Muse to Genius* (London, 1984).

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him, served him caviar and champagne in an apartment she rented in order to "profit from . . . his intellect, his solid knowledge, his noble, unostentatious way of communicating his knowledge." Later in her diaries she acknowledged that "Hollnsteiner is either an angel or a scoundrel. Out of self-respect, I have decided to look upon him as an angel. . . ." Alma subsequently edited out what followed, so at least some of the scoundrel-angel's secrets remain safe.

Despite the hardened shell of agnosticism which Alma affected throughout most of her life, she evinced occasional bursts of religious longing. She mused on the relationship of the artistic to the divine in her earliest diaries, now finally available to English speakers.[2] As a precocious nineteen-year-old, brought up on Goethe, the Greek classics, Nietzsche, and Wagner, she wrote in July 1899:

> But today art is an ageing [*sic*] tart who was once good-looking and, with the help of cosmetics, hopes to get hitched up with a 'new spring.' As knowledge and sophistication grow, true art gradually declines. When did art reach its highest point? When it was at the service of religion. And why? Because belief was genuine, and creation an act of devotion. The artist felt *God* within and created for God[!!!]. And today, does anyone really believe? No: we are enlightened. The religion of our time is symbolism. But it cannot compare with the high-mindedness of former times, one senses the untruth, the lustrous veneer. The artist no longer believes in what he creates. [The last believer was Wagner.] We reach back to the earliest ages, falteringly repeating the words of antiquity, for we no longer speak their tongue. And so it will go on, until art—once lofty and divine, now laid waste and desecrated—is engulfed in a sea of eccentricity.[3]

Teenage nihilism aside, art remained for Alma a sacrament and creators her high priests. She sacrificed many of her ambitions as a handmaiden to her geniuses, but often only until the novelty of their admiration or their creations had worn off. Reminders of her sacrifices and recriminations for all she had foregone abound in her surviving letters and diaries. True, they alternate with ecstatic protestations of devotion to these men and their artistic

[2] DIARIES 1898–1902, selected and translated by *Antony Beaumont.* Cornell University Press. $35.00.

[3] The brackets indicate the revisions Alma Mahler-Werfel made in the early 1960s.

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causes. But her support, valuable as it was, did not come without its price.

Alma was her own greatest creation. She revised history in her memoirs and expurgated her diaries. She burned most of the letters she had written to her husbands and lovers. When she heard rumors that Kokoschka had been killed in battle in the First World War, she rushed to his studio to retrieve all her letters to him. Kokoschka did recover from a severe bayonet wound to the chest and noted his astonishment at the speed with which she had reappropriated this self-revealing evidence.

The intensity of her focus was legendary. She listened to those with whom she spoke with such rapt attention they would feel as if they were alone in the room. This gift of hers is often explained by the hearing loss she suffered after a childhood bout of measles. While it seems not to have affected her ability to hear music, it caused her some difficulty in conversation, especially in larger social gatherings which she avoided when possible. Nonetheless, Alma also understood perfectly how to deploy her charms and would no doubt have seduced her admirers just as effectively with perfect hearing.

Quite a few people were immune to her charm, yet she rarely left anyone indifferent. Alma always provoked extreme responses—the reactions of her contemporaries ranged from abject devotion to passionate hatred (which did not prevent many of her detractors from attending her salons whenever invited). Extraordinarily beautiful and charismatic, intelligent, a promising composer and gifted pianist, Alma was also patently offensive, cruelly manipulative, and heartless to those she deemed untalented. She felt her marriage to two Jews justified her selective and highly-calculated anti-Semitism, a bigotry which even her daughter, Anna Mahler, was not spared.

Four biographies—of which Susanne Keegan's *The Bride of the Wind* is the most balanced and informed—and even an opera staged in Zürich have tried to illuminate Alma Mahler-Werfel's contradictions. Yet, for posterity, she remains the enigma she wished to be. She once noted, not without pride that, "No one will ever succeed in completely describing me, not even I myself succeeded. I am full of enigmas that can't be solved. In distant days they'll say of me: She was a sphinx." Why did this woman who prized artistic creation above all never become the composer she

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wished to be? Why did Alma Mahler-Werfel, so ill suited to self-sacrifice, devote herself to the service of others and their work, particularly when she did not care for Mahler's music and had little interest in Gropius' vision? Why, even though she claimed to be unable to live without Jews, did she persistently indulge in malicious and spiteful anti-Semitic remarks? To what extent did she contribute to her husbands' and lovers' accomplishments and what would she have amounted to without them?

Antony Beaumont, the editor and translator of her early diaries, earnestly hopes they will shed some light on the *éducation sentimentale* of this *femme fatale* and will provide some answers to the puzzles of her character. These diaries, dating from January 1889 to January 1902, consist of twenty-two notebooks, entitled "Suites" 4 through 25. The fate of the first three Suites is unknown. While the remaining ones do provide a glimpse of daily life among the culturally elite upper-middle class in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, they offer limited insight into Alma Mahler-Werfel's contradictions. Instead, the diaries are illuminating chiefly for the speed with which she falls passionately in and out of love and for the fervor with which she marshals support for her latest resolutions in favor of this or that object of her love. Interestingly, they also reveal a faulty musical ear and limited skill in musical notation at the most productive time of her life. However, even these illuminations are somewhat suspect as Alma is clearly playing a variety of roles for her own and perhaps others' amusement.

The picture that emerges of Alma is of a forceful, lively, opinionated, engaged young woman. Primarily, though, the *Diaries* chronicle the three great love affairs of Alma's early life—with Klimt, Zemlinsky, and Mahler—and a half dozen marriage proposals from eligible but not particularly enticing men. They show that Alma's struggle between her desires for submission and domination began quite early. Agonized debates about the extent of her own talents versus those of her loves run through the notebooks like a *basso continuo.* Only with Mahler, who unapologetically demanded her unconditional surrender, does she wonder whether she "can rise to meet him."

Alma's artistic training was already well advanced when "Suite 4" opens. Born in 1879 to the landscape painter Emil Schindler and Anna Bergen, who abandoned a budding career as a soprano

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for her family, Alma was exposed to the major figures in the Viennese art world from her earliest years. Her father lavished attention upon her and was instrumental in forming her indomitable sense of superiority over all but the most exceptional and gifted. Even before his death, when Alma was thirteen years old, Schindler came to represent her ideal of an artist to which few ever lived up.

Alma only received several months of formal schooling, but a series of tutors and her own enthusiasms brought her to an impressive, if uneven, cultural education. At fourteen she began counterpoint and composition lessons with the well-respected composer Josef Labor. She learned most of Wagner's repertoire by heart and would calibrate potential suitors by their response to *Tristan and Isolde.* A friend of her father, the playwright and onetime director of the Burgtheater, Max Burckhard, took her literary education in hand, sending her laundry baskets full of books and accompanying her to the theater and on bicycle rides with picnics of partridges and champagne. By the time she was in her early twenties, his intentions were hardly platonic. "I resisted. He didn't desist, came closer and closer, and finally he kissed me—and this was the worst of it—touched my mouth with his tongue.—That put paid to any illusion of passion. How I had been longing for that moment—and how horrid it actually was. I shall never forget the disillusionment." Despite Alma's contempt for many social conventions and traditional values, she imbued her virginity with a mystical symbolism, holding out not so much for marriage as "spiritual union" with a worthy suitor. Burckhard was not. This did not prevent her from encouraging Burckhard's physical advances then ridiculing him.

Schindler's former disciple and assistant, Carl Moll, an art dealer and a painter in his own right, married Alma's mother in 1897. With Gustav Klimt, he founded the Vienna Secession, a group of artists and architects who rebelled against the academicism then dominating Austrian art. Their first exhibition opened in March of 1898 to great acclaim, and Alma's early notebooks record her frequent visits to the various exhibits, lists of whom she encountered there, and, in detail, her flirting.

Klimt was gradually, inexorably drawn under her spell. Despite his long-standing liaison with his sister-in-law, the dressmaker Emilie Flöge, he avidly pursued Alma. Their frequent encounters

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alternately led to flights of rapture ("Klimt, my Klimt . . . I've just taken a long look at that sweet picture. He's a thousand times more beautiful than [I]. And a genius!") and to sleepless nights when she had nothing but Nietzsche or Wagner to console her. Despite Anna Schindler's disapproval, Klimt joined the Molls on a trip through Italy. He and Alma were able to steal away occasionally, but when her mother read of passionate kisses in her diary, he was immediately sent packing. Moll forced him to choose between their friendship and Alma. Klimt played it safe. It took Alma several years to recover from his "betrayal."

Then she met Alexander von Zemlinsky. Even in his late twenties, Zemlinsky was widely celebrated as a composer and teacher. He exerted a deep influence on his students, among them Schönberg and Webern. At their first encounter, Alma found him "dreadfully ugly, almost chinless—yet . . . quite enthralling." Zemlinsky proved remarkably resistant to Alma's charms—for a while. Once she convinced herself that this "hideous gnome" was in fact of great spiritual and artistic beauty, she was relentless. She began studying with him. He encouraged her composing, but refused to praise her any more than she deserved. His reserve and the power of his music fanned her ardor.

Having captured his devotion, however, her interest, predictably, began to falter. "We kissed and embraced again, but since his attitude is mostly passive—motivated by reverence and modesty—my love is waning." Alma tortured and taunted him, but always praised and flattered again before any break became final. Although she repeatedly assured him and her diary that she wanted nothing more than to bear his children ("little, degenerate Jew-kids . . . On the other hand, I would be perpetuating his name"), she balked at offering him the one hour of happiness he demanded as proof of their love. Their petting, which she describes explicitly enough, grew increasingly heavy and Zemlinsky would probably have received his hour of happiness, had she not met Gustav Mahler.

Mahler, almost twenty years her senior, was then director of the Court Opera, the most prestigious man in Vienna short of Emperor Franz Josef himself. Although Alma preferred Zemlinsky's music, she knew enough to recognize greater potential. Still, she agonized over the decision, listing all that irritated her about

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Mahler, "*his smell, the way he sings, the way he speaks* [can't roll his rrrr's]," and fretting over his debts and ill health. Still unsure about which composer she preferred, she worried, "I don't know . . . whether I love the director of the Opera, the wonderful conductor—or the man . . . I don't believe in him as a composer. And I'm expected to bind my life to this man . . . *What should I do?* And what if Alex were to become famous?" But as her love for Mahler grew, so did her appreciation of his music—or vice versa. Five days after she wrote the agonized passage, she records that he sent her "Das klagende Lied" and notes, "The text is excellent, the melody a little impoverished, but the structure firm and effective. I can imagine some passages sounding quite passable."

Two weeks later Mahler sent his now infamous letter, demanding that Alma give up her composing in order to marry him. "Would it be possible for you, from now on, to regard *my* music as *yours*?" he asked, elaborating over many pages:

> how do you picture the married life of a husband and wife who are both composers? Have you any idea how ridiculous and, in time, how degrading for both of us such a peculiarly competitive relationship would inevitably become? . . . Don't misunderstand me and start imagining that I hold the bourgeois view of the relationship between husband and wife, which regards the latter as a sort of plaything for her husband and, at the same time, as his housekeeper. . . . But one thing is certain and that is that you must become 'what I need' if we are to be happy together, i.e., my wife, not my colleague. Would it mean the destruction of your life and would you feel you were having to forgo an indispensable highlight of your existence if you were to give up *your* music entirely in order to possess and also to be mine instead? . . .[4]

Alma was at first incensed. However, Mahler's ultimatum seems to have deepened her appreciation for his music even further. She decided the next day that "scarcely any music now interests me except his." Alma not only capitulated to, but rejoiced in his demands.

The barriers to their spiritual and marital union had been overcome, yet she records how, at the crucial moment Mahler "lost all strength. He laid his head on my breast, shattered—and almost wept for shame. Distraught as I was, I comforted

[4] From Susanne Keegan's translation in *The Bride of the Wind.*

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him . . . Then I broke down, had to weep, weep on his breast. What if he were to lose—that! My poor, poor husband. I can scarcely say how irritating it all was . . . Words cannot express what I today have undeservedly suffered." When she revised her diaries late in her life, Alma Mahler-Werfel deleted a number of passages, most of which seem to have treated intimate encounters. She allowed this one to stand. Even posthumously, Alma exacts a toll for her support.

Several days of bliss and "rapture without end" followed her disappointment; and on January 16, 1902, she decided she "*must rise to meet him* . . . I must cast out my other soul. The one which has so far ruled must be banished. I must strive to become a real person, let everything *happen to me of its own accord.*"

There the *Diaries* end. In March, Alma married Mahler. She submitted to the strict regime and isolation imposed every summer by her neurasthenic husband. Alma ran the household, suffered two difficult births and a miscarriage, copied Mahler's scores, read aloud to him, and accompanied him, pregnant or not, on his long and sometimes grueling daily walks. As an antidote to this enforced isolation and her profound frustration, she taught herself ancient Greek and even translated Plato, a solution that was supplanted over time with a daily bottle of Benedictine, although in a pinch, sherry would do.

While her despair alternated with periods of ecstatic emotional fulfillment, it eventually helped lead her into the arms of Walter Gropius. The two met on a cure: Alma was recovering from fatigue, drink, and the death from diphtheria of her first child. She corresponded with Gropius in secret until, by a Freudian slip, he addressed a letter, in which he begged Alma to run away with him, to Herr Direktor Mahler. Mahler, thrown into despair at the thought of losing Alma, revised his ban on her composing, arranged for a celebrated soprano to perform several of her songs and even had a book of them published in 1910. Alma assured Mahler that she would not leave him but continued to meet with Gropius whenever possible, writing ardent professions of love to him as Mahler lay dying of septicemia.

Truly suffering from Mahler's death in 1911, Alma was not to marry Gropius for another four years. First, she fell passionately in love with Kokoschka, the "chief savage" of the young Viennese painters whose debut exhibit had caused the Archduke Ferdi-

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nand to declare that he wanted "to break every bone in the young man's body." After three years, during which she claimed never to have tasted "so much hell, so much paradise," Alma began to tire of Kokoschka and was unwilling to sacrifice her modest financial security to his still unrecognized genius. At one point she promised to marry him if he created a masterpiece. In response, he created one of his greatest works, a double portrait of him and Alma entitled *Die Windsbraut.* The affair ended against his wishes, but not before Kokoschka's mother threatened to shoot Alma and paraded up and down in front of her building pretending her extended forefinger was a gun in her purse. After Alma aborted Kokoschka's child, he enlisted to fight in the First World War.

Shortly after the outbreak of the War, Alma once again began corresponding with Gropius, and married him in 1915. More interested in Gropius' good looks and pure Aryan lineage than in his efforts to create a utopian architectural *Gesamtkunstwerk*, she had long desired to have his child. Alma became pregnant soon after they married and quickly tired of him, resentful of the fact that he was away fighting in the War. Once Gropius was demobilized, she rarely joined him in Weimar where he founded the Bauhaus in 1919. Alma stayed in Vienna with her mother and two daughters, Anna Mahler and Manon Gropius. She once again had fallen passionately in love, this time with Franz Werfel, who was quite renowned at the time, often favorably compared with Thomas Mann. She divorced Gropius a year later, having borne and lost a son, Martin Werfel, who survived only a few months.

By the time she married Werfel in 1929, Alma had lost her favorite child, Manon, to poliomyelitis. Werfel's books were soon proscribed by the Nazis (as was Mahler's music) and Alma was forced to flee with him to the United States in 1938. Her exile effectively ended her relationship with Hollnsteiner, who was imprisoned despite his fervent pro-Nazi sentiments (he thought Hitler would prove a new Luther). Hollnsteiner survived the War, but left the Church and married. When he wrote Alma years later that through her hand he had become another, she wanted nothing to do with him. He had not lived up to his promise.

Alma's final marriage was to be her longest, lasting until Werfel's death of heart disease in 1945. They settled in Los Angeles, at the heart of a German émigré community that

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included Bruno Walter, Thomas Mann, and Arnold Schönberg. After Werfel's death, Alma moved to New York where she had lived in 1908 and 1909 when Mahler had directed the Metropolitan Opera. In the 1940s and 1950s, his reputation was in the ascendant and Alma gloried in her role as his widow. Still, Mahler would not have the last word. In a typically backhanded compliment she wrote, "I was aware of Mahler's weaknesses. *But—they—were—still*—MAHLER'S—*weaknesses!*" She died in 1964 at the age of eighty-five.

Despite Mahler's belated encouragement, Alma composed only sporadically after his death. She was still young—only thirty-one—and had no shortage of accomplished composers and musicians who could have mentored her. Yet none of her songs are dated after 1915. Mahler's edict seems a convenient excuse for Alma never having taken the risks necessary to realize her musical potential and pursuing other rewards instead. Zemlinsky, her harshest musical critic, once challenged her out of sheer exasperation: "Either you compose or you socialize—one or the other. If I were you, I'd stick to what you do best—socialize." Alma did, ultimately, do what she did best. And it was more than mere socializing. The male ego was her true instrument. Men, for her, were "erotic" or "unerotic." This had little to do with physical attributes or prowess, but indicated whether someone was worth taking an interest in. Talent was her ultimate aphrodisiac.

"I don't know if Alma was my greatest fortune or my greatest misfortune," Werfel once remarked. Many men were eager to risk such misfortune. Late in life, they were still lining up. The dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann told the aging Alma that in another life they must be lovers. "Even then," Hauptmann's wife remarked, "you'll have to wait your turn."

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ALAN SULLIVAN

Potala

Its ramparts guard an esoteric faith
So rarefied that few dispute its truth
Once they traverse the hinterlands of myth
Which gird the loftiest doctrine found on Earth:
We are not here merely to suffer death
But wend as pilgrims up a karmic path.

When rumor of the Buddha's Eightfold Path
Drew travelers from the realms of Christian faith,
Tibetans glimpsed the shades of war and death
Haunting these eager seekers after truth.
How heavily such strangers trod the Earth;
How lustily they muddled truth and myth.

Already in the West a worldly myth
Seduced many a seeker off his path.
The prospect of an Eden wrought on Earth
Justified extremities of faith
As despots daily redefined the truth
And troops pursued dissenters to the death.

Their banners dyed with the red star of death,
China's armies marched the Marxist myth
Into the keep of undefended truth.
No League of Nations barred aggression's path:
By now the West so doubted its old faith,
It kowtowed to the tyrants of this Earth.

Tibetan exiles scattered round the Earth,
Repeating tales of infamy and death
Yet steadfast in their own pacific faith.
Like bodhisattvas acting out a myth,

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They sprinkle mandalas along their path
Through countries numb to transcendental truth.

Their solace is an unacknowledged truth:
The cruelest rulers subjugating Earth
Pass in the dark like pilgrims on a path,
A penitential round of birth and death
Where suffering turns history to myth
And myth restores a long-forsaken faith.

To learn the truth, we need not yearn for death
Or spurn our Earth, but choose instead of myth
The steepest path, the least assuming faith.

Jade Mountain

They govern well in Heaven,
Muses the Emperor.
The sheaves are neatly shaven,
Pavilions clean and dry,
And the boy leading the scholar
Never loses the way.

What enemies could threaten
This adamant domain?
No foreign devils wanton
So far from the Yangtze's mouth,
Nor does the hilltop watchman
Spot horsemen in the North.

Here children never hunger
Or cry out in their sleep.
No ghosts of hate or anger
Seep from neglected graves;
No adulterers plot escape
Beneath unfalling leaves.

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But the cataract is quiet
As the shaft of an empty well;
And the courtesan is silent,
Her zither on its rack,
Her fingers forever still
And tresses lacquered back.

The Emperor of China
Could no more make her sing
Than the rough provincial miner
Chiselling out the stone
Or the sculptor polishing
This gift for the Manchu throne.

Chastened and repentant,
He resumes his promenade
Grateful for all that's violent,
Unpredictable or awry,
For the veins which mar the jade
And the glint in a living eye.

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ROBERT RICHMAN

Watching You Read

Watching you read, seeing the story in your expression,
the words filling your face and eyes,
you breathe freest over pages of lies.

Watching you read, seeing inscribed on your face
a cautious hello to what is felt and known.
You could live off words alone.

Watching you read, the clauses bearing you on,
the pages holding your look . . .
Until you close the book and are gone.

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N. S. THOMPSON

A Fallen Angel

Beneath the glare of curious light they took
A sample of its yellow skin
And wondered where they should or should not look . . .
Bones surfaced from its cracked, curved spine

Like tiny blocks of ice, some crushed; they gleamed
Transparently. Its natural hair
Was gleaming yellow, too, or so it seemed,
With theirs on end; they could but stare.

There was no blood, only an ichor chrism
Anointing where a pinion twitched;
Stubbed feathers brushed the tints into a prism.
Still eyes could only stare, bewitched

At wings which obviously defied the laws
Of science, broken round its head.
Seeing the mystery, finding no cause,
No wonder that it fell, they said.

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JAMES SEATON

Santayana Today

Because George Santayana's reputation as a critic of American culture is derived mostly from his analysis of a "genteel tradition" that no longer exists, it is natural to suppose that any special significance his writings might have for Americans is now largely historical. Philosophy departments no longer devote their energies to rendering Christianity intellectually respectable, as in their different ways Santayana's colleagues at Harvard, William James and Josiah Royce, attempted to do. Yet if the intellectual consensus dominant throughout Santayana's academic career has long since disappeared, in part because of his own writings, Santayana's own example seems more important than ever. The odd man out at the Harvard of his time, today Santayana appears as a precursor of the postmodernists and multiculturalists who dominate contemporary academic culture in the United States. Henry Samuel Levinson's "Pragmatic Naturalism and Spiritual Life" draws up a list of Santayana's conclusions that parallel the postmodernist consensus:

> Santayana characterized knowledge as nonfoundational inquiry, reason as nontranscendent or immanent criticism, every sort of language as expressive, imaginative, or poetic, every part of existence as contingent or historical, and philosophy itself as a reflection on problems of human finitude rather than a search for first principles or for the really real. What is more, Santayana never gave up any of these views . . .

Santayana's present-day importance, however, is scarcely confined to his significance as a precursor of contemporary trends. While his formulations of postmodernist and multiculturalist themes are at least as radical as contemporary statements, Santayana was able to see the implications and commitments implied by those positions more clearly than most of their present-day defenders. A consideration of some of Santayana's key theses thus enables us to see both the strengths and the weaknesses of contemporary theorizing in a fresh light and even, possibly, to see in what ways Santayana's critique

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of "genteel culture" retains its force, despite the absence of gentility in the America of the nineties.[1]

One of the key tenets of postmodernism is its anti-foundationalism, its rejection of any attempt to anchor judgments on an indubitable reality. Although Santayana described himself as a materialist, from the beginning to the end of his long intellectual life he emphasized the incapacity of language in general and philosophy in particular to convey the truth about the reality of things. In the early *Three Philosophical Poets*, Santayana cautioned that materialism as he understood it was "not a system of metaphysics," but rather "a speculation in chemistry and physiology," fields in which he claimed no special expertise. The most ambitious work of his later years, the four-volume *Realms of Being*, was far from the investigation into the depths of ultimate reality suggested by the title. In *The Realm of Truth*, Santayana cautioned that his "realms" were not to be taken as "objects of belief" but rather "as conceptual distinctions" in "one of [the] many languages" human beings might adopt. Santayana was not offering another metaphysical system but instead "a grammatical or possibly a poetical construction." A grammatologist before Derrida, Santayana argued that what was true of his philosophy applied as well to all other attempts to describe reality:

> . . . any general logic applied to describing the universe, however ancient and well tried this logic may be, remains rather a form of human grammar. We are in a region of free intuition and construction, as in music, with no claims to propounding a revealed or a revealing truth.

Anticipating Stanley Fish's championship of rhetoric over foundational truth, Santayana declared roundly (in *The Realm of Truth*, no less) that ". . . the whole warp and woof of our knowledge is rhetorical while we think it physically existent and constitutive of the world." And long before Paul de Man, Santayana emphasized the inescapably poetic and metaphorical dimension of language. In "Philosophical Heresy," Santayana counseled would-be philosophers to avoid misunderstanding and fruitless controversy by

[1] Carl Rapp argues persuasively that the critique of transcendental philosophy worked out by Santayana in *Egotism in German Philosophy* and other works is "still applicable to our own most recent thinking," including the theories of the "new pragmatists, the new historicists, and the deconstructionists" (*Fleeing the Universal: The Critique of Post-Rational Criticism* [Albany, 1998], p. 242).

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confessing in advance that a "system of philosophy" is first of all "a personal work of art," a more or less ingenious "myth."

Santayana's willingness to "leave the theory of the universe" to "science . . . or to religious revelation" did not signify confidence in either of the two alternatives but rather skepticism about his own or philosophy's ability to do any better. He repeatedly warned that all discourse, including scientific statement, inevitably contained a large fictional component. Santayana rejected the claims of scientists to be "laying bare the intrinsic nature of things." In "Revolutions in Science," he conceded that science "yields practical assurances couched in symbolic terms" but emphasized that it could achieve "no ultimate insight." Reflecting on his philosophical development in "On the Unity of My Earlier and Later Philosophy," Santayana noted that he had ultimately come to virtually the same conclusions "in respect to all experience and all science" that he had earlier reached "in my younger days in respect to religion"; in both cases "critical reflection has emancipated me from the horrid claim of ideas to literal truth."

Santayana anticipated today's multiculturalism as well as its anti-foundationalism. In "The Genteel Tradition at Bay," Santayana ridiculed the New Humanists for taking as a universal standard a way of life that was scarcely fitted for its own place and time, let alone all the world. Santayana's question "Can the way of Matthew Arnold and of Professor Norton be the way of life for all men for ever?" was more damning than any straightforward denunciation could have been. Not that Santayana thought that more emancipated spirits could do any better. For Santayana the fact that a given morality was "native" was reason enough for those who grew up according to its precepts to embrace it as adults; he was unwilling "to suggest that anybody ought to exchange his native religion or morality for a foreign one," whatever their respective merits might appear to be to an outsider. "On the Unity of My Earlier and Later Philosophy" emphasizes that Santayana's own ideas about morality, his "naturalistic ethics," were "proposed merely as optional." Unlike many materialists, including most Marxists, Santayana refused to draw moral conclusions from his materialism. In *The Realm of Truth,* he pointed out that materialism could not "justify moral ideals morally," since "morally a sentiment can be confirmed only by another sentiment, for whatever that may be worth." The notion of "moral rightness in moral sentiment" was "either a tautology, meaning that

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what you prize you prize, and what you want you want, or it is a tangle of confusion."

Because Santayana's own positions are so close to the governing assumptions of today's postmodernists and multiculturalists, his recognition of the implications of those positions has a particular interest for us today. His philosophic caution may serve as a valuable counterexample to the claims of revolutionary significance often made on behalf of postmodernist and multiculturalist positions. Santayana was well aware that professions of skepticism could easily turn into a kind of dogmatism. The skeptical theorizer, for example, might feel that superior awareness gives him or her the right to explain biology to the biologist or physics to the physicist. Santayana, however, understood that philosophical reflection was no substitute for scientific knowledge. Santayana pointed out in the revised version of *The Life of Reason* that the recognition that scientists proceed from a particular standpoint, that they lack a godlike neutrality, may prevent us from claiming to know truth in any absolute way, but such theorizing "invalidates nothing in science; much less does it carry with it any rival doctrine of its own." Philosophy does not serve as a final arbiter of science, just as theory today cannot. Santayana would be unwilling to give cultural studies the right to legislate for science—to demand, for example, a feminist science or a multiculturalist mathematics. His skepticism made him suspicious of any attempt "to base science on a deeper foundation or to override it by a higher knowledge."

Santayana's rejection of the absolutes of religion and idealistic philosophy did not lead him to reject tradition and past culture altogether in the manner of today's postmodernists. Instead, Santayana argued that the difficulty of achieving certain truth for oneself pointed to the importance of the cultural heritage, of what he called "human orthodoxy." Santayana thought it was the task of philosophy to explore and clarify the conclusions worked out by common sense; the attempts of philosophers to impose a system that contradicted, however ingeniously or brilliantly, the point of view of common sense seemed to him futile "heresies." After all, as Santayana pointed out in "Philosophical Heresy," the system builders themselves "must appeal for their foundations and for their plausibility" to nothing other than "parts of that human orthodoxy" whose authority they elsewhere reject. There

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was much to correct in common sense, but the only basis for reform was common sense itself. What was true of our view of the external world was also true in morality and politics. Despite his skepticism about the dogmatic claims of religion, Santayana acknowledged in *The Life of Reason* that the morality it sponsored was fundamentally justified:

> If traditional morality has much in it that is out of proportion, much that is unintelligent and inert, nevertheless it represents on the whole the verdict of reason. It speaks for a typical human will chastened by a typical human experience.

Santayana distinguished sharply between paganism and heathenism. The Greeks were pagans, but they were not heathens. They were not People of the Book, as the Moslems call Jews and Christians, but they possessed Homer and the dramatists, they accumulated and stored the lessons of experience over generations. Heathenism, on the other hand, arises whenever people refuse to learn from the lessons of the past. In *Egotism in German Philosophy*, Santayana described "the morally and essentially heathen" as "those who possess no authoritative wisdom, or reject the authority of what wisdom they have; the untaught or unteachable who disdain not only revelation but what revelation stood for among early peoples, namely, funded experience."

Santayana's stance allowed him to answer in a straightforward way a question that bedevils advocates of multiculturalism, the question of the position of the theorist who asserts the impossibility of acting outside a particular culture but who nevertheless makes statements claiming transcultural validity. Universal understanding, Santayana recognized, is purchased at the cost of a renunciation of action in favor of contemplation. Whenever one makes political or social choices, one must do so in accord with a particular morality. Reflecting on his experience in various cultures in his autobiography *Persons and Places*, Santayana concluded that it was a mistake to suppose that the neutrality of contemplation could ever serve as a guide to practical life:

> The full-grown human soul should respect and understand all passions; at the same time it should possess and embody a particular culture, without any unmanly relaxation or mystical neutrality. Justice is one thing, indecision another, and weak. If you allow all men to live

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> according to their genuine natures, you must assert your own genuine nature and live up to it.

In *The Life of Reason*, Santayana objected to those sophists, ancient and contemporary, whose pose of sophisticated relativism prevents them from frankly avowing what seems good to themselves:

> If the sophist declares that what his nature attaches him to is not "really" a good, because it would not be a good, perhaps, for a different creature, he is a false interpreter of his own heart, and rather discreditably stultifies his honest feelings and actions by those theoretical valuations which, in guise of a mystical ethics, he gives out to the world.

Santayana's writings demonstrate convincingly that the skepticism about reality associated with anti-foundationalism and the rejection of universal moral principles associated with multiculturalism can be worked out in a philosophically impressive way; the same texts suggest that the implications of those doctrines are far from those which are usually drawn from them today. More surprisingly, Santayana's analysis of the "genteel tradition" seems relevant to academics who seem to be carrying at least one set of Santayana's ideas from the sidelines to the mainstream of contemporary thought. The old genteel tradition was inherently contradictory, since it attempted to unite two philosophies with radically contradictory assumptions, Calvinism and transcendentalism. In "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," Santayana reduced the former to three theses: "that sin exists, that sin is punished, and that it is beautiful that sin should exist to be punished." The latter asserted that the individual soul was divine and hence incapable of sin. Santayana observed that in spreading this liberating doctrine, Emerson and the other transcendentalists were preaching to the converted:

> If you told the modern American that he is totally depraved, he would think you were joking, as he himself usually is. He is convinced that he always has been, and always will be, victorious and blameless.

Santayana argued that philosophical idealism became the academic orthodoxy in American universities not so much because of its intellectual merit as because it provided a way by which its adherents could affirm their own goodness (free from complicity in original sin), demonstrate their intellectual sophistication (by

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embracing the counter-intuitive notion that ideas are the only reality) and still remain Christians in some vague sense. Similarly, today's postmodernist and multiculturalist orthodoxy allows its adherents to affirm their own goodness (free from complicity in Western logocentrism), demonstrate their intellectual sophistication (by embracing the counter-intuitive notion that there is nothing outside the text) and still remain liberals in some vague sense. And just as adherents of the genteel tradition purchased emotional and cultural gratification at the cost of intellectual consistency, so the adherents of the new orthodoxy pay the same high price for the same reward.

Unlike yesterday's idealists and today's anti-foundationalists, Santayana did not employ his dialectical skill to flout the intuitions that theorists and non-theorists alike go by in their everyday lives.[2] Instead, Santayana called on the resources of traditional religion and philosophy in order both to clarify what could be clarified and, equally important, to take account of the extent of human ignorance. He was well aware that no verbal legerdemain could resolve the standing questions about the nature and meaning of reality that non-philosophical common sense raises but cannot answer. Similarly, Santayana knew what many multiculturalists prefer to ignore: the price of affirming equal sympathy for diverse cultures and moralities is a detachment that guarantees practical irrelevance. Santayana himself willingly paid this price, thereby disqualifying himself from preaching but not from philosophizing. Throughout his career, Santayana sharpened the oppositions that the adepts of the genteel tradition and their less-than-genteel successors have preferred to blur. Difficult as it once might have been to reconcile the dogmas of Christianity with the antinomian gospel of Emerson, it is today no easier to reconcile the dogmas of liberal egalitarianism with the antinomian gospels of Foucault or Derrida. Today as earlier, such conflicts are resolved most often by blurring or ignoring them. Today as earlier, the work of Santayana provides an example of intellectual integrity, and also a demonstration of the cost of such integrity.

[2] In "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," Richard Rorty emphasizes the parallels between those nineteenth-century philosophers "who argued that nothing exists but ideas" and those contemporary theorists "who write as if there were nothing but texts" (*Consequences of Pragmatism [Essays: 1972–80]* [Minneapolis, 1982], p. 139).

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JOHN SIMON

"When the Ecstatic Body Grips"

It would be presumptuous, indeed foolish, to try to pick the greatest love poem in the English language. But I will stick my neck out and name my candidate for the finest overlooked love poem in modern English, one deserving a place in every anthology and every poetry lover's consciousness. It is a poem to be savored, reflected upon, indeed learned from, even though didacticism is the farthest thing from its mind. I discovered "When the Ecstatic Body Grips" by Eric Robertson Dodds in *The Viking Book of Poetry of the English-Speaking World*, compiled by the poet Richard Aldington, and published in 1941. I have not come across the lyric in any other anthology.

The poem affected me more than any other in that worthy collection, which, alas, gave its author's name as Dobbs rather than Dodds: it was not till much later that I gathered that "Dobbs" was in fact E. R. Dodds, the distinguished Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, best known for his *The Greeks and the Irrational*, a classic in its own right. In his youth, he had published a slim volume of poetry containing this remarkable poem. I got the volume out of Harvard's Widener Library in the hope of more such gems, but found nothing in it of comparable stature. Still, not a few poets have made it on one immortal lyric, the most famous being, I suppose, Félix Arvers with his celebrated sonnet.

There was in one of my Harvard Humanities sections a Radcliffe undergraduate from Rumania, as it was then known, whose name, like those of my other students, I have long since forgotten. But she was considered one of the sexiest Cliffies of her era, a student in one of Albert Guerard's creative writing classes, and held to be very talented by her teacher. To me, one day, she handed in an assignment consisting of an original poem, in which I promptly recognized "When the Ecstatic Body Grips." Only the canny creature had substituted a synonym for one word in every one of the poem's twenty-eight lines—seven quatrains in iambic

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tetrameter rhymed ABAB—assuming to be thus cleared from possible charges of plagiarism.

When I confronted her with her misdeed, she denied any knowledge of Dodds's poem, and brazenly ascribed the similarity to coincidence. I forget how I handled the case (mildly, I imagine, given the girl's allure), but one thing sticks in my memory. Not ungifted though she was, her every change was for the worse. This proved to me the poem's supremacy: 28 times out of 28, Dodds had unerringly chosen the *mot juste.*

Let us go through the poem stanza by stanza. Readers would do themselves a service by not skipping ahead to read the entire poem in advance. Later, they should read it over as a whole; for now, it is better to follow and consider the twists and turns as each stanza zigzags ahead.

> When the ecstatic body grips
> Its heaven, with little sobbing cries,
> And lips are crushed on hot blind lips,
> I read strange pity in your eyes.

The poet-narrator is recollecting—whether in tranquillity or not remains moot—the carnal act with his beloved. The approach of consummation is graphically evoked by word after precisely descriptive word. "Grips its heaven" is particularly apt in its conjoining of the transcendent *heaven* with the animalistic *grips.* Even the punctuation—or its absence—in "hot blind lips" conveys a frenzy unchecked by commas. But then, surprisingly, the "strange pity" in the woman's eyes. All is not so simple as might be expected in the sexual act.

> For that in you which is not mine,
> And that in you which I love best,
> And that, which my day-thoughts divine
> Masterless still, still unpossessed,

That ambiguous *For* creates suspense: is the pity *for* something or *because* of something? It emerges that the best-loved thing about the mistress is that unattained, perhaps unattainable, innermost self. Human nature, being what it is, craves most what it doesn't, and possibly cannot, have. That something is the

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cynosure of the lover's fantasies, nicely referred to as *day-thoughts*, for by nightfall the woman is there in the flesh. *Divine*, too, is apt: though meaning *guess at*, it has overtones of divinity—the godhead of the new, the unknown, the yet-to-be-conquered, like the summit of an even less accessible Mount Everest. "Masterless still, still unpossessed" further clarifies the psychological situation: the man is after complete possession, total mastery over his mistress. Note how the chiasmus juxtaposing "still, still" emphasizes the yearning and frustration.

> Sits in the blue eyes' frightened stare,
> A naked lonely-dwelling thing,
> A frail thing from its body-lair
> Drawn at my body's summoning;

The very first word strikes the right note. The lovers in bed are horizontal, but this something *sits*: it is semi-upright, at least partly evading the posture of fusion. The eyes almost have to be blue, the color of virginal purity. This is a naked, hence vulnerable thing; it is *lonely-dwelling*, a timorous animal in its den, as confirmed by *frightened* and *body-lair*. It hides in the body, but is not a part of it, as the animal is not part of the sheltering lair. Could it be the soul? It is *drawn* by the man's sexual *summoning*, with the ambiguous *drawn* equally suggestive of compulsion as of fascinated eagerness.

> Whispering low, "O unknown man,
> Whose hunger on my hunger wrought,
> Body shall give what body can,
> Shall give you all—save what you sought."

Here the tragedy of the situation unveils itself. The shy thing "whispers low" and reveals that the man is as *unknown* to the woman as she is to him. What unites them is mutual *hunger*: the repetition of the word stressing that the sexual act is compulsive, instinctual, urgent, and primitive—that it bypasses intellect and freedom of the will. The reiterated *shall* (rather than *will*) makes the coercion more palpable; the repeated *body* underlines the physical, animalistic, primordial at work. And then the devastating "save what you sought," with that sibilant alliteration hissing

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out the woman's negation of total surrender. Again, perhaps, the soul, clinging to its independence.

> Whispering, "O secret one, forgive,
> Forgive and be content though still
> Beyond the blood's surrender live
> The darkness of the separate will.

Again, the man, too, remains *secret*, but is supplicated (two *forgive*s, prominently placed at the end and start of consecutive verses) to forbear and moderate his demands. And, once more, that *still*, which here reverberates with its other meaning of silence, impenetrable otherness. Now it is not just body, but also *blood* that joins in the copulation—everything, in short, save "the darkness of the separate will," where *darkness*, tersely and powerfully, conveys the *terra incognita* into which there is no access. The *will*, the essence, remains *separate*, whether tragically or triumphantly remains unresolved, although *darkness* suggests bleakness.

> "Enough if in the veins we know
> Body's delirium, body's peace—
> Ask not that ghost to ghost shall go,
> Essence in essence merge and cease."

Body, blood, veins: the locus of orgasmic frenzy and subsequent repose. Left out is *ghost*—this time clearly revealed as the spirit or soul (as in "ghostly father," for a priest ministering to the soul), or *essence*, again with spiritual and philosophical implications. This is the quiddity that remains above the fray, as it were, seeking and maintaining its separateness (no *merge*) and its life (no *cease*, as in some kind of death). This sounds proud and noble: even if sad on one level, surely grand and heroic.

> But swiftly, as in sudden sleep,
> That You in you is veiled or dead;
> And the world's shrunken to a heap
> Of hot flesh straining on a bed.

Here, at last, the unambiguous dénouement in the orgasm—the, so to speak, anticlimactic climax. That capitalized *You* is

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plainly the higher self, the soul, subjugated or slain. And the "world's"—note the urgency and effectiveness of that colloquial *'s* rather than the formal *is*—"shrunken to a heap." How pitiful that diminishment; how pathetic, a mere *heap*! And what a heap: *hot*, which returns us to the "hot blind lips," and *flesh*, which patently eliminates the soul. And that heaving heap is "straining on a bed," with *straining* implying the desperateness of it all (like that initial *grips*), and *bed* locating it in the mundane, the real and mortal—the place where not only the upper-case self (*You*), but also the rest (*you*) dies. What now of the soul? Gone? For good?

If we now glance back at the whole poem, what do we get? An extraordinarily sensitive, penetrating, and evocative depiction and analysis of the sexual act in both its physical and psychic aspects, and the raising of the deepest, insoluble problems of identity, sharing, fusion, confrontation of the One with the Other—in short, the lineaments and limits of love. Great art almost never hands out answers as do lesser works: it merely raises, as precisely and profoundly as possible, the great questions, and leaves the rest to us.

Here the question of human sexuality—and, ultimately, identity—is viewed in lyrical form, but whether tragically or with thickly black humor is up to us to decide; in any case, the poem is not a piece of snide sarcasm or a facile diatribe. The Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford was a good man, as you could learn most recently from a charming anecdote in Roger Rosenblatt's memoir *Coming Apart*, and his younger self was clearly no less humane. What informs the poem is pity for the human condition, that "strange pity" the poet *reads* in his beloved's eyes in stanza 1. That pity radiates outward, and, in stanza 7, encompasses the lovers' whole world shrunken to a pitiful and pitiable heap.

Even the choice of meter attests to Dodds's astuteness. Had he used pentameter, there would be something statelier, more formal about the poem: iambic pentameter, after all, is the stuff of English heroic and dramatic verse, although, to be sure, of love sonnets as well. Still, by choosing tetrameter, a more tripping measure, Dodds achieves a fragility as well as narrative speed suited to the urgency and breathlessness with which the poem hurtles to its shocking conclusion. For shocking it is: after the woman's soul has pleaded, seemingly successfully, for her essence

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not to merge with her lover's, and so yield up its autonomy, in stanza 6, that is precisely what happens in stanza 7, as hot flesh strains in a heap on sheets foreshadowing winding sheets.

Or is it? Might that merging be only temporary body's delirium, transcended into body's peace and resumption of the soul's selfhood? Or is the delirium of flesh a permanent abdication of innermost independence? Something tragic does seem to take over when that capitalized You becomes veiled or dead. But the final answer—if such there be—is up to the individual reader. Only let him or her be warned by a splendid thought from Professor Dodds's *The Greeks and the Irrational*: "We must resist the temptation to simplify what is not simple." *Caveat lector*, and beware all of us when the mighty Cyprian goddess grips our ecstatic bodies.

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GEOFFREY BROCK

Odysseus Old

In darker hours, I try recalling why
I left her. Gazing into wine, perhaps,
or at a girl, I'll call back that lost island

of permanent sun, that woman immune to the passage
of all that passes. Memory's a ragged sail,
and years have faded to a wash of gasping

fascination: long months mapping the pale
shores of her skin, the smooth peninsulas,
the inlets; then the roads into her frailer

interior. Calypso frail? She was.
When told she had to let me go, such tears!
But loss couldn't mean for her what it does

for us, I'd thought. How vain! And how sincere
my vanity! I was bored, and blessed or cursed
to know Penelope still waited here.

Such faithfulness: ambrosia-sweet at first,
maddening later on. Wasn't she human?
Didn't lack of water make her thirsty?

And am I so weak, who float through this dry room
nightly, dreaming water? If offered again—
but just what was I offered? And by whom?

No matter. This one offers all a mortal can
and more, and still this glooming. For how should I,
who once was envied by every Ithacan,

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who have known with naked ears the song of sirens,
and who now am neither sung to by beauty nor envied,
be glad? I chose this, chose to slowly die.

And chose the woman sleeping by that window,
her gray hair silvering in the moon's weak light.
Her eyes flicker beneath their lids. Her fingers

twitch and clutch, and with some inward sight
she weaves and unweaves me, her days, this night.

The Upper Room

It's been so quiet up there for so long
I sometimes wonder if the tenants have left.
But lying in my bed, propped on the soft
Pillow of sleep, I'll hear a faucet go on,
Or something like a chair scraping the floor,
Or the thin click of a door. After the noise,
I hold my breath to wait for a voice or sneeze,
A laugh, a muffled come-cry—something more

Definitively human. And so it is
That I myself have grown into the habit
Of silence, whispering into the phone,
Muting the TV, so as not to miss
The evidence. One night I thought I had it:
Strains of a gospel tune—then it was gone.

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JANE MAYHALL

Serenade

Every change in the weather is that you are
not here to feel it. No hands cup
the cup. Your coat hangers hang empty in the closet,
the death-ride has carried you;
psychologists and friends may survey the wreckage and cringe,
fitting their ideas on your demise as fitting.
But they don't know what you
are missing.

The grand willingness you lived for,
gestures of unseen faith.
Tonight, the moon's heavy rising languor over a Village bar,
you will not register in your mind.
The moon, liquidity and mists, staggering between
buildings, foggy and graceful. Like the last time we saw
Balanchine's *Serenade* at the State Theater,
the equivalent, his absorption.

The world you'd embarked on, that waited for
a tryst, the blue-lit, elegiac costumes, sparse scenery
nobody had to explain. How silently you scanned it,
the moon-tulle dancer swaying in the mist,
the tactile and rough awareness—and all your consciousness
of it, terminated.

People don't want to think that's what happens.
Even art's great disposition, like a
kiss, forever denied you. Refracted energy, shimmering
like an aura alongside buildings; the very
idea of obliteration itself,
snuffed out.

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RENNIE McQUILKIN

The Lighters

In her eighty-ninth year, she's reducing
her inventory—china to the children, mementos
to the trash—but in her boudoir
keeps half a dozen square-shouldered Zippos,

her husband's initials on one,
the best man's on a second, the rest anyone's guess.
Dry-chambered, their spark wheels rusted shut,
they are lined up gravely on a jewelry chest

full of antique gap-toothed keys,
elaborate scrollwork on their hilts, fit to open
high-backed steamer trunks, perhaps the secret entry
to a sunken garden

where every night the dry-bones assemble
in mothballed flannels and handknit sweaters
to roll their own, light up
like fireflies and, sotto voce, remember her.

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FLOYD SKLOOT

Seed

She is alive. Although her doctors said
there was nothing to be done, she is home,
planting her summer garden, is not dead,
and plans to eat everything she has grown
in this plot, each carrot and tomato,
each squash, pepper, lettuce leaf. She will live
beyond the harvest and what will not grow
is her tumor, its flowers held captive
and still beneath her heart. Only the live
wire of her will separates her now from
the future displayed in black and white five
months ago, backlit clearly. It will come
sooner or later, but this is her time
to cultivate and seed. She is alive.

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CRAIG WATSON

Prayer to Venus

Horace: iii.26

Not long ago I was alive with passion,
and not without my glory in your wars.
But now these fabled weapons, like my words,
are blunted, worthless. I give them up for good.

I hang them here in meager supplication
to you, Goddess of love, born of the sea.
Here, my crowbar, my brilliant torch, my bow—
what use are they? She has shut her doors forever.

But I ask you this, o Goddess, only this,
Queen of Cyprus, far from Thracian snows:
Please let her feel just once what I have felt.
Raise the lash high above her arrogant head.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Portraiture: Public and Private Lives

A SUCCESSFUL PORTRAIT HAS TO DO ONE OF THREE THINGS. Forget "rendering a credible likeness." That attribute either goes without saying, or—as in the case of abstract portraits or whimsical *hommages* (e.g., Arthur Dove, Florine Stettheimer)—is pretty close to irrelevant. Rather, a portrait worth anyone's time should evoke the spirit or inner life of the individual, or what we take to be the artist's version of that spirit; it should make us urgently desire to know more about the sitter; or it might suggest a wider symbolic connection even as we are pondering a specific individual, in the way that Holbein's *Erasmus* or a Weimar portrait by Otto Dix brings an entire vivid culture to mind. In short, a good portrait painter needs to be a craftsman, storyteller, mythmaker, psychologist, obsessive prober—a true biographer, a seeker for (or inventor of) "the figure in the carpet." Ninety percent of museum portraits don't fulfill even one of these goals. A handful realize all of them. On these terms, John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) rarely inches out of the pack.

The subject of a thorough and skillfully arranged retrospective this year (seen at the National Gallery of Art in the spring and at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston over the summer), Sargent has always been a difficult artist to respond to in an honest way after so many intense shifts in taste and ideology in the modern era: abstraction, social realism, politicized art, conceptualism, the relentless "de-definition of art." He never had any of the lonely heroism attached to his name that Whistler, Eakins, Homer, or Stieglitz enjoyed, nor does his work lend itself to interesting new readings in the vein of recent Mary Cassatt or Marsden Hartley scholarship. Yet if we were willing to have a fresh look at the Hudson River School in the 1980s, is there any reason why the favorite painter of Isabella Stewart Gardner and Lady Agnew of Lochnaw shouldn't be reevaluated shorn of those dreary, pampered, enervating associations, if we are willing to take two steps back from fin-de-siècle cultural history and all its baggage? An exhibition at the Whitney in 1984 provided a fair chance to do so but, if memory serves, did not cause so much as a blip on the screen. Now, in the final days of the century that saw Sargent's reputation plummet from the peak of critical and popular esteem in 1900 to inconsequence in the fifty years after his death, another attempt has been made to take his measure, and

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the timing was probably right. In fact, the crowds at the National Gallery looked appropriately impressed, and so, perhaps, the purely aesthetic pleasures of John Singer Sargent have been reclaimed for a new generation. In this endeavor, the museum and gallery emphasis over the last decade on the watercolors, landscapes, and genre scenes (e.g., *A Dinner Table at Night*) makes sense; showcasing his tepid form of Impressionism (e.g., the much-reproduced *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*), less so. The attempt to include him in the gay canon no doubt snares a few more fans. (On that topic, I found Douglas Shand-Tucci's 1997 book, *The Art of Scandal: The Life and Times of Isabella Stewart Gardner*, more absorbing than most of Sargent's male nudes themselves, which were not a part of the Washington retrospective.) But, when all is said and done, it is the portraits that are the essence of Sargent, and with the best will in the world, I am defeated—as ever—by their glibness and predictability.

Part of the problem resides in Sargent's understandable desire to distance himself from more traditional realist portraitists, whose count-every-button style seemed conservative even at the time. For a man with formidable talents at anatomical drawing, loose brushwork, and subtle color effects, the right path was not hard to find: fluidity rather than tightness or exactitude, rich shadows, elongated figures, slightly odd compositions and perspectives, a hint of the enigmatic, and an occasional, appreciative nod at a more energetic femininity than his peers displayed. Yet how seldom are these artistic choices much more than clever—self-consciously smart rather than profound. *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882) are incongruously arranged—two in the darkened recesses of the drawing room next to a five-foot Chinese vase, one standing to the front and far left of her sisters, the youngest on the floor with her doll—to suggest a mystery that isn't there, while the Metropolitan's famous *Madame X* (1894) and the portraits of Robert Louis Stevenson or Henry James are more gripping as social documents than as art experiences. Even *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth* (1889) is all calculation and craft, without a trace of the passion and risk that the actress and the role bring to mind. The gold light suffusing the face of Boston philanthropist Henry Lee Higginson in his 1903 portrait is truly majestic, and the 1894 image of the boyish aesthete W. Graham Robertson, with his red eyes and jade-handled cane and all-encompassing coat, is much more than a steal from Whistler's *Comte Robert de Montesquiou*. The fact is that certain themes—Robertson's youth and dandyism especially—piqued Sargent's imagination in a way that middle-aged success and complacency did not. Sir Frank Swettenham, painted in 1904, is lost amid the emblems of Empire—the high-collared white uniform, military helmet, telescope, globe, medals, rugs, and gilt chair, each and every item painted to perfection. Is Sargent telling us that Swettenham was a pompous ass, even as he gloried in the status of having been "done" by Sargent? Hard to know.

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The underlying temperament of the artist has been lost as well, in his own skill and in the vacuousness of his sitter.

"Elegant and full of panache . . . dashing and often daring" was how the National Gallery's brochure described the dozens and dozens of Sargent portraits on view. For three of those adjectives, a resounding assent. As for "daring"—not a chance. And Sargent proves as well as anyone that dash, elegance, and panache don't add up to much without nerve. The Henry James analogy is usually made at some point when considering Sargent, and so a word or two needs to be said about that old chestnut, which implies (I always felt) a superficiality and narrowness in the hyper-elegant James because he didn't write about crazed or earthy types, the Hedda Gablers or Sister Carries of modern literature. James indeed surrounded himself with the kind of people Sargent painted—affluent women, connoisseurs and litterateurs, society folk. But the material a James or a Sargent chooses doesn't automatically denote seriousness or its lack; what counts is what is done with that material. The moral struggle of Isabel Archer or Maggie Verver, the awakening of Maisie or Lambert Strether, or the cunning of Kate Croy or Gilbert Osmond are nowhere to be found in Sargent's gleaming surfaces and milky brushwork. The two artists have little in common beyond their social circles and bank accounts, and there is no equivalent in James's prose for the untroubled and untroubling virtuosity that made Sargent so popular with his clientele.

The other kind of portraiture—the kind that goes beyond artistry, in part because it is grounded in an acute perception of its subject—comes in a variety of forms. Sometimes it revels in quirkiness. A good example of that was to be seen last summer in Norbert Goeneutte's 1891 *Doctor Gachet*, part of "Cézanne to Van Gogh: The Collection of Doctor Gachet," a savvy exhibition devoted to one of the most unusual art patrons and homeopathic physicians of the nineteenth century, organized by the Musée d'Orsay, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, and the Metropolitan Museum. To Goeneutte, Gachet at sixty was a red-haired eccentric, weary but intense, surrounded by objects of introspection (glasses, magnifying glass, books), a ham-fisted figure out of Bruegel vastly too large for the small canvas and wood frame that try to contain him. A few feet to the left at the Met, in Amand Gautier's lively realist portrait, we saw the good doctor thirty years earlier, cocky and cosmopolitan; the two pictures together suggested the flowering of a bizarre originality, a life lived according to its own standards. It would be impossible to spend time with these two paintings and not want to know everything one could about the man who cared for van Gogh in his final days and understood before anyone else the value of artists as different as Cézanne and Guillaumin.

At other times, the deeper kind of portraiture has to do with masterful manipulations of technique. Julia Margaret Cameron's 1867 photograph of Sir John Herschel, included in the Metropolitan's summer show "Inventing a New Art," is a case in point as well as one of the

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clearest instances of photography as a medium of equivalent complexity to painting and drawing. Having had the old man wet, dry, and tousle his shock of white hair to catch the light just as she wished, with the camera practically thrust in his face, Herschel becomes a Victorian intellectual's version of a Biblical prophet. But next to the darker original a print from a variant negative was also on display, letting us see how the gentlest reworkings of tone can convey an altogether different persona. In a more up-to-date context, Nick Miller's 1994 portrait of fellow artist Patrick Hall was one of the few memorable works in the uninspired mass of figurative painting that comprised "When Time Began to Rant and Rage," a survey of modern art from twentieth-century Ireland at the Grey Gallery at NYU. A lusciously paint-dripped, bespectacled form, midway between abstraction and representation, set against a thickly painted indeterminate background—colors out of Lucien Freud, brushstrokes out of Kokoschka, mood out of Martin McDonagh (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane, The Lonesome West*): the position of a creative man in the western counties is evoked with urgency and economy.

Very few contemporary painters of note have concerned themselves with portraiture. Beyond Chuck Close, Lucien Freud, David Hockney, and a few others, the list is not long. Modern notions of ego, individuality, the possibility of psychological narratives, and "the death of the author" (in this case, the artist willing to interpret character) have left the genre in something approaching disrepute. That is our loss, but there isn't much point in railing against the inevitable. Consider the June exhibition of portraits by Eric Fischl at the Mary Boone Gallery. Here is an artist of considerable ability and reputation (though that ability has sometimes been put to facile use and his reputation now fluctuates like that of so many art stars of the 1980s), and if anyone is going to have something penetrating or offbeat to say about his myriad friends, you would think it would be Fischl. Instead, with the exception of one painting (of director Mike Nichols, looking anxious and fierce rather than comic), we were served up a lot of nice brushwork, inoffensive color, seductive shadows, and dollops of charm. Steve Martin is a jovial middle-aged man at the beach, *April in Paris* is Fischl's lovely partner (the artist April Gornik) nude in bed in a shaft of sunlight, and Mary Boone leaning on a windowsill is given the face of an impish, wizened old man—a joke about image and actuality that doesn't come off. The 1998 self-portrait of the artist clowning about—belly thrust forward, hands behind his back, a transparent mask on his face and a fez on his head—could be taken as a clue about the artist's discomfort with frolicking and foraging at a dead end of art history. Sargent minus the satin and the sabers, we don't need.

Recent years have seen a considerable amount of attention, scholarly and otherwise, directed toward the settings in which we experience works of art, preeminently museums. Panel discussions, books, articles:

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the where-have-we-been? whither-are-we-going? angle has been done to death. From my own point of view, I would say we are in the midst of a hiatus (connected to how much money is available for museum use these days?) in the war against the "specialness" of museums; as crowds are wooed by public-relations firms and greater numbers of school children are dragged off to "get culture," charges of elitism and class consciousness diminish. At least nobody fantasizes about burning the places down anymore, as Robert Ruscha did so humorously in *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (1965).

Ruscha's painting was included in the best examination of this topic I have ever seen, "The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect" at the Museum of Modern Art last spring, curated by Kynaston McShine. If there was any problem with the show, it was that it was too benign in its study of the relationship between artists and dominant cultural institutions and its reflections on the way in which museums have changed the nature of art, originality, and perception. The fury or disdain that animated some artists in their reaction to "temples of art" like the Louvre or the Met were never more than hinted at, and even Marcel Duchamp felt tamed in this context. (Sometimes, though, the hint was a good one: Hans Haacke's 1990 *Cowboy with Cigarette* plays on Picasso's collage style and Philip Morris' sponsorship of MoMA's "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" show.) But in its look, its wryness, and the scope of its selections, the show was both wonder-inducing and thought-provoking. From assorted hymns to and critiques of collecting—Charles Willson Peale's *The Artist in His Museum* (1822); Joseph Cornell's constructions; the photographs of Louise Lawler and Thomas Struth; Susan Hiller's eerie boxes in *From the Freud Museum* (1991–1996); Barbara Bloom's facsimile museum room, *The Reign of Narcissism* (1989), in which all the objects and texts bear her own likeness or name—to the irreverence of Komar & Melamid, Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, and Claes Oldenburg, "Museum as Muse" raised valid questions about connoisseurship and appropriation, the power or narrowness of a cultural aura removed from daily life, technology in service to (or at odds with) aesthetic experience, and the link between art and money, and art and didacticism.

These are always timely matters, though they seemed downright prescient in light of two of the most publicized exhibitions in New York in 1999, "The American Century, 1900–1950," the first installment of the Whitney Museum's millennial extravaganza, and the opening of the new Greek galleries at the Metropolitan Museum. These events indicated profoundly different approaches to design, education, and aesthetics.

"The American Century" was earnest, exhaustive, utilitarian and undramatic. I kept thinking that if this whirlwind tour of American visual creativity were actually the Whitney's permanent collection—a fantasy at a museum that has been at best cavalier in regard to its own holdings—the whole thing would be just fine. Where else could one go

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to see so many American paintings and photographs under one roof? As a special exhibition, it had other burdens placed on its shoulders, which its very conception, its fundamental view of what a museum can and should do, prevented it from fulfilling. First and foremost, the decision to go with a chronological, interdisciplinary approach (film clips, book covers, musical tapes)—making "The American Century" a kind of interactive, 3-D American history textbook—meant that its aim was to be comprehensive, even pageant-like, a format that is usually superficial, or pedagogical on too elementary a level, and certainly mitigates against original ideas, caustic debates, or in-depth digressions. With one floor devoted to the "Age of Confidence," one to the Jazz Age, one to the 1930s, and one to World War II and the postwar period, viewers absorbed what they were supposed to with no chance to make unexpected connections, pushed along as they were from one well-established heading or summary to the next. Aesthetic judgments were necessarily secondary: Arshile Gorky and Norman Rockwell as expressions of mid-forties America? Walker Evans and Kate Smith? Well, yes. Another serious drawback to mixing photographs, drawings, and paintings is that lighting levels have to be adjusted to the more light-sensitive materials; more than a few rooms at the Whitney were distressingly dark for the buoyant paintings they housed, such as Florine Stettheimer's *Spring Sale at Bendel's* (1921) or Archibald Motley's *Cocktails* (1926).

A survey of such breadth inevitably disappoints some viewers even as it educates others: by definition, it exists as a primer, skewed to the novice rather than the scholar or longtime student. So having the chance to see little-known works like Jonas Lie's *Path of Gold* (1915) from Atlanta's High Museum (in the gallery devoted to the city in the 1910s) would be a pleasure for anyone, as would any exposure to art from the Whitney's own under-displayed permanent collection (e.g., William Zorach's 1913 *Woods in Autumn*). But true surprises were few and far between, and the potential for irritation was high. Artists like John Sloan were represented by lesser examples of their work, and no one would guess from the paltry survey of Synchromism that a major venture in color-abstraction had been a part of the American Century before World World I. On the other hand, the Whitney did right by Arthur Dove and the Precisionist and Regionalist painters, and it properly incorporated the Harlem Renaissance into twenties cultural history, which museums have not always done in the past. A few design decisions and curatorial selections were captivating. Passing through the velvet curtains of a pitch-black room showing clips from a Busby Berkeley musical, I was held by the slanting wall that began with Edward Hopper's *New York Movie* (1939)—an usher standing alone in the dark—and carried my eye past stills of Jean Harlow and Joan Crawford to Walt Kuhn's gray-tinted *Show Girl* (1931), the whole arrangement coming to a marvelously ignominious rest on an adjacent wall with Grant Wood's *D.A.R. Ladies* (1932).

The truly dispiriting moments of "The American Century" were the

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last—ironically, the years when the whole world might have agreed with the hubris of the exhibition's title. Size and ambition were paramount at this juncture, when Abstract Expressionism was beginning to transform the very meaning of oil on canvas. Given the timing of the recent Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock retrospectives, it might have been impossible for the Whitney to secure the loan of a large, major Rothko or Pollock, but something of commensurate spectacle was needed in these galleries, not the small-scale paintings that brought the show to a tidy, blandly informative, anticlimactic close. This was a case in which comprehensiveness worked against itself: several paintings by different artists said less than one or two grandiose paintings would have.

The new Greek galleries at the Metropolitan Museum, which opened to much fanfare in April as part of a three-stage expansion/renovation that will eventually take over the current restaurant and cafeteria space, are something else entirely. The seven rooms (combined with the Robert and Renee Belfer Court of Cycladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean art, which opened several months earlier) display artworks from the sixth through fourth centuries B.C. and now make the Metropolitan one of the best sites for the study of Aegean culture in this hemisphere. The long main corridor, renamed the Mary and Michael Jaharis Gallery, has been restored to its original McKim, Mead, and White grandeur with its overhead skylights (obscured since World War II) reopened, flooding the space with breathtaking natural light from sixty feet above. The works in this barrel-vaulted hall include some large-scale Roman copies in marble of lost Greek bronze statues as well as original Greek statues and terra cotta vases, while three spacious galleries on each side give us the range of the museum's stellar collection beginning with the naturalism of the early Archaic period through the time of Alexander the Great: Corinthian vases, bronze griffins, haunting marble steles, gold brooches, bracelets, bowls, coins, terra cotta figurines, and of course—given pride of place—the "New York Kouros."

These galleries are more than a superb space in which to contemplate individual artworks, though. They say something about the way in which aesthetics and history, or the wish to enjoy beauty and the desire to gain information, might merge—to go back to the MoMA show, they say something about the way in which the museum itself becomes an element in our apprehension of ourselves as creatures drawn to a certain kind of experience. Chronology is adhered to, for instance, in the arrangement of these rooms, but in actuality one would need to follow a somewhat strange path to keep to a time line because the two rooms that deal with the art from the fourth century B.C. and the two rooms that deal with the art from fifth century B.C. (and so on) are on opposite sides of the long Jaharis Gallery. Furthermore, doorways are placed in each side gallery (three to a room) that are just as likely to send one wandering in another direction. This space offers the opposite of the traditional lockstep route (i.e., you must see this, now you must see this, please keep going), and in fact it was not until my third or

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fourth visit to the galleries that I felt impelled to proceed in a more art historically "logical" sequence. At no time is a momentum established that forces a viewer to move in a particular direction. Choice, whim, variety, curiosity: the motivations are more varied, as they should be and so rarely are in modern museums. Furthermore, the didactic aspect—which is, of course, vital because most museumgoers are not going to have the background needed to appreciate such a disparate display—is kept in perspective, with wall texts, labels, and maps of unostentatious utility. At certain angles, the words on the wall about Peisistratos of Athens or the development of vase-painting techniques can be entirely avoided if that is your preference.

Finally, the quality of light pouring into these rooms is a statement in itself. In strictly architectural terms, the museum has outdone itself. Viewing conditions on a bright morning are perfect, and seeing the tops of the buildings across the street on the Fifth Avenue side does nothing to detract from what is on the pedestal before you or under glass; on the contrary, a connection is made that undermines any rhetoric about museums as unnaturally divorced from the world outside the limestone facade. Beyond that, the overpowering paleness that surrounds us—white walls, clouds seen through the skylights, the bleached quality of the statues and grave markers (artworks that we forget were often brightly painted in the day of their creation)—reminds us that we are not to pretend we are seeing the same things the ancient Greeks saw themselves. Their spare look as well as their new context has altered everything. The new Greek galleries, then, perform the ultimate museum function of dispelling pretense, of emphasizing the reach and the limits of their educational and artistic functions. They allow us a fresh encounter with their artworks as they heighten our consciousness of ourselves in the act of perceiving beauty and strangeness.

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KAREN WILKIN

Matisse and Picasso in Fort Worth

AT FIRST READING, THE EXHIBITION ANNOUNCED by the press release from the Kimbell Art Museum, "Matisse and Picasso: A Gentle Rivalry," sounded like a wonderful idea. As far as I knew, no major show had examined the links between these two giants of modernism before, even though clear connections (and oppositions) are not only plainly visible throughout their work, but are well documented in the anecdotal history of twentieth-century art. Anyone with a smattering of art lore knows, for example, that Picasso is supposed to have begun the daringly transformed group of female nudes known as *Les demoiselles d'Avignon,* his most radical picture to date, after seeing Matisse's startling vision of Arcadia, *Le bonheur de vivre,* when it was first exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants of 1906. Anyone with only slightly more specialized knowledge knows that the two painters moved in overlapping circles, that they exchanged pictures, and that they remained in touch (with some breaks) throughout their long lives.

That the first formal examination of the bonds between Matisse and Picasso was being organized by the Kimbell, a bastion of high-minded, thoughtful scholarship and serious, ambitious collecting, was a point in the exhibition's favor. Surprisingly, the Kimbell was this ambitious effort's only venue. Was a trip to Fort Worth in order? But would "Matisse and Picasso" offer any revelations? The exhibition would not survey the entire trajectory of the relationship between the two "presiding geniuses of modern art," as the Kimbell's director, Dr. Timothy Potts, described them in the press release. Instead, it would concentrate on the late years of their connection, from the 1930s until Matisse's death in 1954; however ambitious, the show would not bring together *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* and *Le bonheur de vivre*—or their equivalents, since *Le bonheur de vivre,* in the Barnes Collection, does not travel. Then, too, the modifying phrase "A Gentle Rivalry" signalled a certain *parti pris* on the part of the exhibition's curator, Yves-Alain Bois, Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., Professor of Modern Art at Harvard. And it was hardly news that even brilliantly innovative artists paid attention to one another's work.

The modern studio is a lonely place, but nobody (apart from amateurs or "outsider" artists) makes art in a vacuum. Anyone who spends time with painters and sculptors knows that even the most self-sufficient, stubborn individual is preternaturally sensitive to the doings of the people he regards as his peers. I don't mean the ingrained professional score-keeping, born out of competitiveness, that keeps

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track of who has won an award or is having a retrospective or has sold more or has been reviewed favorably; I'm referring to something more abstract, a highly specialized, deep consciousness driven by aesthetic ambition for the art—as opposed to career ambition. Sometimes artist-colleagues engage in real, long-lasting dialogues, complete with exchanges of studio visits and intense conversations—or arguments; sometimes they maintain a more distant familiarity based on making sure that they see one another's exhibitions.

By and large, artists tend to look at the work of other artists, whether their contemporaries or their predecessors, "for what they can get out of it," as a painter friend puts it. An artist's encounter with a work that seems challenging or admirable or "puzzling" (my friend's word) can make itself felt in the viewer's subsequent work—sometimes involuntarily—in the guise of related formal or conceptual inventions; these manifestations, whether willed or unwilled, can be efforts to assimilate what was admired or to exorcise its power or to explore its implications (which may be very different from the implications that the original work's author chooses to pursue). All of which is a long-winded way of saying that while it's obvious that the relationship between Matisse and Picasso was complicated, it's not surprising that they would continue to take each other's measure from the beginning of their careers to the glory years when they were fully formed and internationally acclaimed. Matisse was one of the very few living artists who could put aesthetic pressure on Picasso, just as Picasso was one of the very few who could challenge Matisse; it would be surprising if signs of a common awareness were *not* visible in their work. Add the well-known fact that Picasso was an omnivore who happily devoured just about anyone else's work that could feed his imagination, and the question remained: what was to be learned from a show that underlined the evidence of connections between these two modern masters?

In spite of these caveats, the idea of the exhibition remained appealing, so much so that, in the end, the prospect of seeing a generous selection of significant Picassos and Matisses, all chosen because of their subtle interrelationships, was irresistible. It was time to use some frequent flier mileage. I'm glad I did, although I should say immediately that I have great reservations about "Matisse and Picasso: A Gentle Rivalry." On the plus side, it was exciting and even instructive to be confronted by the exhibition's assembly of more than a hundred fine paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures by the two masters. The selection was a splendid mix of stellar "textbook" examples and unusual or rarely seen works. Matisse's little-known 1940 *Still Life with Shell*, from the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, for example, an astonishing composition with a disorienting viewpoint and a dazzling orchestration of acid yellow, pale salmon-pink, and dull red, was almost worth the trip alone. An eloquent scatter of floating shapes that threaten to slide out of the confines of the canvas, *Still Life with Shell* is held in perilous balance only by the emphatic, confrontational block of a black tablecloth.

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Whether or not I agreed with Bois's conclusions, it was often stimulating and again, often instructive, to be encouraged to consider the likeness and unlikeness of what Matisse and Picasso were up to at a given time. Some pairings, particularly those of the two artists' sculptures, were both thought-provoking and convincing. Bois's most persuasive visual argument was made by setting the later versions of Matisse's *Jeannette* series beside some of Picasso's bronze female busts of 1931 (and a number of related sculptures and drawings by both artists); the smooth, bulbous, phallic forms out of which Picasso constructed his women's heads seemed, in this context, like direct (albeit aggressively sexualized) responses to Matisse's increasingly simplified, swollen conflations of nose, forehead, and chignon in his *Jeannette*s. Seeing these works together bolstered Bois's contention that Picasso began the bronze heads after seeing an exhibition of Matisse's *Jeannette* series, even though there is no clear documentation to support the idea. But if seeing these sculptures together suggested connections between the two artists, it also underscored the unbridgeable distance between them. Picasso's sculptures (like most of his paintings) always appear to be assembled from a series of individually modelled, ambiguous parts, while Matisse's (like his paintings) appear to be conceived as single, unequivocal masses whose spatial articulation depends on a progression of subtle related profiles. A Picasso drawing for a proposed sculpture, breaking it into self-contained, discrete parts, like a do-it-yourself kit, emphasized the point.

Unfortunately, this kind of illuminating juxtaposition was exceptional. Too many of the exhibition's comparisons seemed motivated more by speculative preconceived ideas than by visible or even plausible relationships. It was difficult, for example, to accept the notion that Picasso's pictures of his studio at La Californie, a series begun in 1955, a year after Matisse's death, were conceived as homage-cum-mourning, especially given what we have been told about Picasso's horror of illness and death in John Richardson's biography. The paintings are crowded with motifs that could be described (as Bois describes them) as "Matissian"—palm trees seen through tall, arched windows, patterns of window tracery, an elaborate Moroccan dish, works in progress on the easels, and above all, matte black expanses that simultaneously evoke dazzling exterior light and a room darkened against that dazzle—but I suspect that these correspondences are better read as reflections of the common experience of two artists living and working in the South of France than as Picasso's making overt references to Matisse.

Too many of the show's comparisons seemed so literal as to be downright simplistic. Bois tends to see each of Picasso's female nudes with raised arms as a reference to a Matisse odalisque and similarly, to find allusions to Picasso's sleeping women in every Matisse figure who leans on a table to rest her head on folded arms. An open window with a scrolled iron railing in a Picasso indicates, for Bois, the influence of Matisse despite the glaringly obvious ubiquity of windows with elaborate

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railings throughout France; exuberant pattern or arabesque drawing in a Picasso is presumed to refer to Matisse, Picasso's lifelong *horror vacui*, his persistent loading of surfaces with repetitive marks, notwithstanding. In fact, despite the ample pleasures afforded by individual works and sometimes by groups of works, the cumulative effect of the exhibition was to make its motivating concept seem less interesting and less intelligent than it promised to be. (I am not alone here; the verdict of several distinguished Matisse and Picasso scholars to whom I have spoken recently about the show has ranged from "over-determined" to "such a silly idea.")

The catalogue doesn't help. A copiously illustrated critical monograph by Bois—which reproduces many works not in the show as well as those exhibited—it is full of interesting, even illuminating information about who did what, when, and well stocked with pertinent quotations drawn from the vast literature of Picasso and Matisse reminiscences, from the artists' own statements, and from the critical literature of various periods, assembled to document the two men's contacts and to account for what they were able to see of each other's work at various times. But this useful, persuasive contextual material is embedded in the fashionable theories, convoluted prose, and allusions to currently esteemed theoreticians that are today's obligatory indicators of academic seriousness. Early in the text, for example, a potentially meaty examination of differences between Matisse and Picasso sinks under the weight of academic modishness. Bois suggests that Matisse sought intense identification with the particular characteristics of the seen (which is not to say that he wished to reproduce those characteristics literally); Picasso's search was for visual equivalencies between apparently unrelated things—Bois calls this "metaphoric seeing-as"—exemplified by such images as the celebrated portrait of Françoise Gilot as a woman-flower. Matisse, Bois argues, because of his passionate commitment to seeing things as they were, rather than to revealing their likeness to other things, was incapable of creating images that yield to this kind of multiple reading, which helps to account for Matisse's general rejection of Cubist ideas.

Bois then makes much of the notion that Cubism, for Picasso, was a gradual discovery of "something that came to be known, through the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure and his fellow linguists as 'the arbitrariness of the sign.' " Bois sees the visual punning of Picasso's "seeing-as" as a transposition of the principle that "signs do not arise by imitating the things they refer to, but by differing from other signs within a linguistic system . . . to the realm of a representational sign-system such as figurative painting." The key example is Picasso's famous 1942 bull's head constructed with a bicycle seat and handlebars. "Nothing shows better than this sculpture," Bois maintains, "how the remarkable economy of Picasso's semiological system issues from a convergence of metonymic signs (of fragments, which are the stuff of collage or assemblage) into metaphor." Maybe.

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When he is not invoking Saussure or Bakhtin or their ilk, how does Bois characterize the nature of the conversation between these widely divergent artists? The subtitle, "A Gentle Rivalry," provides a clue, but the catalogue text suggests something much harsher. Whether he means them ironically or not, Bois's section headings consistently use loaded terms such as "skirmishes," "rounds," "violence," "truce," and "final volley." He equates a moment of peaceful coexistence between the two artists during the Second World War with small children's egocentric "parallel play," but his principal metaphor is adversarial: the chess game. Bois sees Picasso and Matisse as locked in a fixed set of moves and responses, like the patterns of movement allowed individual chess pieces, whose form is dictated by the specific artistic personalities and aspirations of each artist. Anything either of the two men does demands, as inevitably as in a game of chess, an answering move designed not only to confound the opponent, but also to bring about his defeat.

The metaphor of the chess game carries with it, of course, the assumption that the conversation—or more accurately, the confrontation—is restricted exclusively to two players. The game is a one-on-one struggle that, when played at its most exalted level, permits no other participants—no kibitzing allowed and no alternative moves on other boards considered or acknowledged. Yet as I progressed through the Kimbell's exhibition, Bois's conceit seemed less and less apt. The very unexpectedness and individuality of the best works in the show made the idea that given propositions elicited fixed, prescribed "moves" seem ludicrous. The pairing of Matisse's celebrated *Large Reclining Nude*, formerly *Pink Nude* (1935, Baltimore Museum of Art; the Cone Collection), with Picasso's equally famous *Nude in a Garden* (1934, Musée Picasso), made the personality of each artist so vivid that it was impossible to imagine either one responding to anything but his own imperatives. Matisse's female figure exists simultaneously as an evocation of three-dimensional flesh disposed in space and as a pink shape meticulously adjusted to a gridded rectangle; that shape presses outward, expanding the space of the canvas. Picasso's sensuously abandoned sleeper, with her luminous rosy skin, reads, by contrast, as a soft knot of sexual parts, a sort of brioche with conveniently placed orifices that pulls our focus inward, to the center of the canvas. Matisse's nude is no less sensuous than Picasso's, but her pose seems determined equally by a wish to delight the eye and a desire to invoke the history of art; Picasso's sleeper is presented mainly in terms of easy access and accommodating padding.

Seeing two groups of economical images of dancers by the two artists together had a comparable effect. There are, admittedly, superficial similarities between Picasso's 1933 line drawings of pneumatic nudes prancing through a lively pas de deux and Matisse's drawings and lithographs of single figures, entitled *Dancers and Acrobats*, from 1931–32. Both turn female forms in motion into spare calligraphy against an uninterrupted expanse, but there all likeness ends. Picasso's line

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describes swelling forms, ample posteriors, and tapering thighs. The movements of the agile little figures conjured up by this line seem conditioned by a need to display (like the sleeping *Nude in a Garden*) all of their sexual attributes simultaneously; Picasso's rollicking dancers spiral so that they can show breasts and buttocks at the same time, which, oddly, heightens their three-dimensionality, in spite of the pared-down quality of the drawing itself. Matisse's line, by contrast, abstracts movement instead of describing volume. His rapid gestures create configurations that slide in and out of reference, powerfully suggesting the trajectories of limbs in space at the same time that the exact relationship of those limbs seems unstable and unpredictable. (Think of the stripped-down pas de deux in Balanchine's masterpiece, *Agon*, in which all expectations of what arms and legs can properly do, of who supports whom and how, of high and low, are subverted or reversed; the tension and surprise become almost unbearable.)

The problematic nature of Bois's tête-à-tête chess metaphor became clearer the longer I spent with his show. I was constantly alerted not just to the give and take between the two "players," but also to the hovering presence of a crowd of other artists, from all periods in the history of art, whose example reverberates through even the most original of Matisse's and Picasso's work. Braque is clearly part of the equation. So is Matisse's close friend, Bonnard (whose work Picasso apparently disliked) and Michelangelo and Titian and Poussin and Delacroix and, perhaps above all, Cézanne, and many more. Cézanne's *The Black Clock* (c. 1870, private collection), with its implacable darks, its ambiguously voluptuous pink seashell, and its squeezed, tense structure, haunts Matisse's *Still Life with Shell*, just as Michelangelo's *Dawn* from the Medici tombs haunts his *Reclining Large Nude* from the Cone Collection and Titian's Venuses inform Picasso's *Nude in a Garden*. Similarly, the implied connection between Picasso's 1946 mural *The Joy of Life* or *"Antipolis"* (Musée Picasso, Antibes), and Matisse's seminal canvas of 1905–06, *Le bonheur de vivre* (Barnes Foundation)—not in the Kimbell's show, but reproduced in the catalogue—seemed overly literal and too exclusionary (even if Matisse did draw other Picassos in the museum). Granted both pictures include goats and boys playing pipes, but the disparate scales and visual weights accorded these elements by each painter, not to mention the radically different spatial and chromatic structures of the two pictures, make the link seem circumstantial, at best; I suppose a case could be made for a tie between the two paintings' standing female nudes, but what is more interesting is a broader issue: that two twentieth-century modernists should have tackled (repeatedly, as it turns out) one of Western art's most time-honored, traditional themes—Arcadia, the terrestrial paradise. Once again, as throughout the exhibition, it appears that the game in which Matisse and Picasso were engaged—if that's what it was—resembled not a two-person event with formal rules and conventions constraining the players' actions, but rather a messy free-

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for-all with a constantly changing group of participants (some of whom may not even know they are playing) and infinitely flexible rules.

Bois's thesis hinges on two issues, which framed the selection of works at the Kimbell. His first contention springs from the view, shared by many of his colleagues, that Matisse's Nice period interiors from the 1920s, with their costumed odalisques and exotic props, are evidence of a retreat from modernism. Bois sees Picasso's work of the same period as a series of messages sent to Matisse to lure him back to competing in the modernist arena. The second notion concerns Matisse's presumed desire to divorce color and contour—something Picasso accomplished, according to Bois, in Cubism, which freed drawing from signification. (I warned you.) In Bois's view, Matisse achieved this only at the end of his life, in his Vence interiors of the 1940s, where bold, descriptive drawing floats against loose, geometric planes of color. It's a curious idea. It underestimates Matisse's achievement in the Vence interiors, which reprise, in extraordinarily fresh, vigorous terms, the nuanced visual rhymes and assonances of the accouterments of the studio first announced in works like *The Red Studio* (1911, Museum of Modern Art). It fails to account for the way line and edge function in Matisse's work as testimony to his acute perceptions of the three-dimensionality and spatial complexity of the world around him. And it fails to account for Matisse's excitement about at last "carving color," as he described his method of cutting shapes out of painted paper, an invention of his mature years that surely permitted the ultimate fusion of contour and color. I'm oversimplifying Bois's argument; but if all Matisse was after in his lifelong search for ways of making visible equivalents for his perceptions and emotional responses *was* a way of detaching contour from color, mightn't he ended up as Raoul Dufy?

Periodically throughout "Matisse and Picasso: A Gentle Rivalry" startling relationships *were* suggested by paired works. But these thought-provoking connections almost always turned out to raise more questions than they answered. For example, Picasso had never seen Matisse's *Dancer in Repose* (1942, private collection), when he painted *The Rocking Chair* (1943, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris), yet the pictures have uncanny parallels—similar pinks in the tilted tile floors, related yellow shapes that stand for dress in the Picasso and armchair in the Matisse, a crisp red line that defines the edge of the dress in the Picasso and the wood of the chair in the Matisse. What is equally strange, many documented encounters with specific pictures often seem to have had little visible effect; there are no overt connections, for example, between any of Matisse's works and a spiky Picasso landscape that Matisse liked enough to live with for an extended period. Perhaps these two powerful individuals were attracted to works dramatically unlike their own?

In the end, "Matisse and Picasso: A Gentle Rivalry" was stimulating—as far as it went—because of the individual works it brought together and the connections it forced us to consider. But it was also irritating because the show (and its catalogue) oversimplified relation-

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ships that are infinitely complex, subtle, and probably inexplicable—or at least, not explicable in terms of direct cause and effect. What the show made clearest were the differences between these two modern masters. Over and over, we saw Matisse transforming the artifice of his subject—the studio setup, the posed model, the faux-oriental interior—through sheer brilliance of formal invention and intensity of feeling. Over and over, we saw Picasso reminding us of the artifice of what he had done, compelling us to admire his ingenuity in pulling off something slightly outrageous, slightly improbable. But didn't we already know this about them? I'm told the Museum of Modern Art is mounting an expanded examination of the still provocative question of the links between Picasso and Matisse. At the very least, the Kimbell show will serve as a good preparation for that event.

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BERT CARDULLO

The Happiness of Your Friends and Neighbors

CHRISTOPHER LASCH ONCE CALLED OUR ERA THE AGE OF NARCISSISM, but several recent films seem to be proposing that it is really the age of hedonism—of ego-gratification as well as egoism. And that ego-gratification comes primarily in the form of sex: the getting of it, the mastering of it, the getting rid of it or him or her. American movies about American morals have been plentiful from the beginning, but American movies about American moral shallowness or sensual debasement are endemic to—in any case, are proliferating at—the close of this, the American century. In recent months we've had *Bad Manners*, *Very Bad Things*, *Happiness*, and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, not to speak of the documentary *Unmade Beds* and the film adaptation of David Rabe's play *Hurlyburly*. All these works, to a greater or lesser degree, from a blackly comic angle to an icily clinical one, are critiques of the sheer value we place on sexual intercourse. The utopian rhetoric of the sexual revolution, combined with the commodification of sex to sell everything under the sun, has guaranteed, these pictures wittingly reveal, that millions of Americans are conditioned to expect erotic salvation on demand and become bitterly disappointed when their lust is not satisfied.

A different kind of sexual revolution occurred in England in the latter half of the seventeenth century, during the Restoration, when the upper class rejected the strict Puritanism of Cromwell's Commonwealth in favor of a carnal permissiveness that bordered on libertinism. In interviews, Neil LaBute, the director-screenwriter of *Your Friends and Neighbors*, has professed his admiration for the brittle, satirical style of Restoration comedy, although there is still some dispute over just what is being satirized in these comedies of manners—the Machiavellian licentiousness of aristocratic rakes or the increasingly philistine hypocrisy of the repressive society against which they were reacting. The same dispute cannot be said to exist about LaBute's first attempt at creating a contemporary American version of the constricted world of Restoration comedy, *In the Company of Men*, which concerned the figurative revenge that two up-and-coming young men wreak on women in general by wooing an ordinary young woman individually and abandoning her together. Their vindictive prank is spoiled, however, by the inception of deep feeling in the guileless woman, feeling that ensures our sympathy for her and that marks the two men off as objects of ridicule.

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No feeling except sexual desire erupts in LaBute's second feature, *Your Friends and Neighbors*, but that desire occurs in a yuppie vacuum as opposed to a hippie rebellion, and therefore is doubtless the target of this *auteur*'s satire. In addition to the same symmetrical plotting and the same air of sexual ruthlessness as the British comedy of manners, *Your Friends and Neighbors* even contains two scenes in which Jerry, a theater professor, and one of his female students rehearse extracts from a well-known Restoration comedy, Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. It is in the first of these rehearsal scenes that Jerry utters what can be considered this picture's signature lines, "These characters want to fuck. It's always about fucking."

The highly structured narrative of *Your Friends and Neighbors* unfolds with the neatness of a blueprint or mathematical equation, which is one of the ways in which LaBute objectifies or dehumanizes his oversexed characters. Another way in which he does so is by *never* having these characters refer to each other by name, even though their first names are listed in the credits! Not only don't we know their names, we don't even know where our "friends and neighbors" live; the movie occurs in the bedrooms, bars, art galleries, supermarkets, and gyms of some unspecified American city, from which LaBute provides not a single exterior shot to help us get our bearings or gain some perspective. These people live in their own world, the filmmaker thereby implies, one that is just as constrained as the aristocratic circle of Caroline England from 1649 to 1685. In that world, six people (two couples and two singles) advance through various combinations or permutations, as well as through the same circumscribed set of places, until they arrive pretty much back where they started: in a state of emotional frigidity or aridness.

Let's begin with Terri and Jerry, who are falling out as a couple (unmarried) on account of his inability to perform in the bedroom: she complains that he talks too much during intercourse, even during the rear-entry kind (preferred by her), which only interferes with the unadulterated act of fucking. As Terri flatly puts it, "Fucking is fucking. It's not a time for sharing." Barry has similar problems with his wife, Mary, who also prefers not to face her partner during sex: "spooning" is her style, but it leads to premature ejaculation for him. Barry's dysfunction may be related more to his penchant for masturbation, however, than to his mate's preferred position for intercourse. "Nobody gives me more pleasure than I give myself," he confesses to an acquaintance at work; "I'm my best lay." So his friend Jerry secretly tries to lay Mary instead, but he can't perform with her, either. Terri, for her part, abandons the quartet of Jerry-Terri-Barry-Mary—a quartet underscored on the soundtrack by two musical quartets from Dvořák and Schubert, respectively—to begin a lesbian affair with Cheri, whom she meets at an art gallery where the latter works as a curatorial assistant. "Love's a disease," these two women later both declare; "but it's curable," adds the physical Cheri as she begins to touch and kiss her new sexual partner.

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Cheri individually meets every member of the "quartet," in addition to the other single, Cary, for the first time when each visits the art gallery: in the same continuous medium-to-full shot, with the same framing, with similar conversation, and with the same artwork of hard-angled human bodies, or body parts, in the background. This, of course, reduces all six characters to the same common visual denominator, just as their two-syllable names ending in the same vowel sound reduce them almost to a single verbal designation. But these repetitious, even ritualistic, scenes in the art gallery do something more, for they suggest, contrary to what many of us would like to believe about the therapeutic powers of aesthetic experience, that art—particularly of the fragmented, decontextualized kind found in this gallery (and in this movie?)—has done nothing to alleviate these characters' spiritual anomie. Especially not that of Cary, a medical doctor whose detached, clinical approach to his work matches the laboratory-controlled coolness he brings to the bedroom.

A sneeringly arrogant, vengefully misogynistic, repellently exploitative stud, Cary not only propositions Cheri and Terri—unsuccessfully in both instances—he also impregnates Mary. He ends *Your Friends and Neighbors* naked in bed with Barry's wife, dispassionately caressing one of her breasts and asking, "How does that feel?" Appropriately, this unreconstructed, unrequited sexual predator opens the film as well, gymnastically practicing the moves of intercourse at the same time as a tape recorder plays pillow-talk "moves" that he has previously recorded. We hear the real Cary talking after sex, however, when he viciously berates one of his dates for staining his expensive linen sheets with her menstrual blood. Then, upon being asked by Jerry and Barry in a steam room to describe the best sex he has ever had, this malevolent monster proves his dedication above all to sexual gratification on his own terms, with anyone of his choosing, when he recounts with genuine delectation the gang, revenge rape of a male classmate in high school.

Although Cary is certainly the worst, or most misanthropic, of this picture's characters, he has the competitive company of the other two men and the three women, who give as good as they get. This is particularly true of Terri, whom we see in her last scene in bed, her eyes masked as she tries to sleep, while Cheri uncharacteristically begs in vain for some kind of response from her "lover" other than a sexually carnivorous one. Terri ignores not only Cheri here, but also Jerry, whose desperation telephone call to her—after yet another episode of impotency, in this instance with one of his undergraduate students—goes unanswered. As for Barry, the final time we encounter him he is alone in bed, trying to have phone sex, but discovering to his dismay that now he is impotent even with himself.

Barry is photographed in his last scene (the film's penultimate one) from the overhead position, and LaBute's cinematographer, Nancy Schreiber, places her camera at just such a high, humanly diminishing angle for all the scenes of (aborted) sex. The quality of Schreiber's color

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imagery is such that, looking back, you remember it as color, unlike Tony Hettinger's stark, almost sterile cinematography for *In the Company of Men* (which in retrospect seemed to have been black and white). But still, this is less color by DeLuxe than by DeDuct, a flat type of color that tellingly gives the eye neither rest nor relief—everywhere, that is, except in a few of the bedroom scenes, which are ironically lit in warm, ocher-and-red tones to suggest loving intimacy where there is only lustful indulgence.

The editing of *Your Friends and Neighbors* also differs from that of *In the Company of Men*, yet the same man, Joel Plotch, cut both pictures. In fact there was little editing in LaBute's first film: scene after scene was placed before us, usually in carefully apportioned full shot of two people, and got played in one extended take. The idea was that we as spectators were voyeuristically intruding—as opposed to having the director "intrude" for us through intercutting—on the lives of the two male characters, who themselves were intruding on the life of the single female figure. In *Your Friends and Neighbors*, LaBute uses more editing, more intercutting from person to person within a scene, less crystallizing of a scene in one uninterrupted shot. And this intercutting is apposite not only because its visual isolation underlines each character's emotional disconnection or spiritual alienation, but also because such editing emphasizes the idea that LaBute is treating each of these people (or each is obdurately treating him- or herself) like a separate, interchangeable integer in some grand set of cinematic-deterministic calculations.

The actors, of course, have no such authorial control over their characters in this film, over these individuals' irredeemable depravity, self-styled misery, or callous remoteness. Aaron Eckhart, who was the nastier of the two males in *In the Company of Men*, is softer and sadder here as Barry, proving that his success in the earlier picture was the success of a skilled performer, not of a man merely playing himself. The nastier role, of Cary, this time goes to Jason Patric, and he almost makes too much of it, as if to overcompensate for the fact that he looks like the feckless comedian Dennis Miller. Ben Stiller is his usual, aggressively urban self as Jerry, a self that, in its paradoxical impotence or inefficacy, he has also displayed in such recent, subversively bawdy comedies as *Flirting with Disaster* and *There's Something about Mary*.

Mary in *Your Friends and Neighbors* is played by Amy Brenneman, who bravely and aptly makes the least interesting of the film's women just that—uninteresting. The two "interesting" women's roles go to Nastassja Kinski, as Cheri, and Catherine Keener, as Terri. Kinski makes a comeback of sorts here as a lipstick lesbian, and she is refreshing: supple, suggestive, natural rather than brittle, obvious, and repressed, as we might have expected. Keener, for her part, is uniformly excellent in the pivotal female role—*thematically* pivotal because, like Cary's, Terri's sexual voraciousness knows no bounds. This young woman was last seen by me in *Walking and Talking* and *Living in Oblivion*, where she showed a quality that serves her well in *Your Friends and Neighbors*: the ability to

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treat candid subject matter with almost surgical precision, so coolly, in fact, that this material becomes idiosyncratically comic.

"Idiosyncratically comic" is the tamest description one could apply to Todd Solondz's taboo-smashing *Happiness*. Ironically titled like *Your Friends and Neighbors*, *Happiness* has also been called Solondz's second feature after *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, although it is actually his third. (Solondz's first film was *Fear, Anxiety, and Depression*, which brought misleading comparisons with the work of Woody Allen.) And if, after only two movies, Neil LaBute could be called the poet cinematic of Indiana, then Todd Solondz must be called the poet cinematic of his native New Jersey. Indeed, LaBute's smiling response to the question, "Where does all your negativity come from?" could just as well have come, with a change of state, from the writer-director Solondz: "I live in Indiana. We realize we're in the middle of nowhere out here, and we're very sore about it."

In the comedy-of-desperation *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, Solondz was sore not only about the "excruciating torment" of his seventh-grade experience at the hands of various bullies (his own family included), but also about the general experience of growing up in the kitschy suburbia of the Garden State. His self-confessed alter ego in *Welcome to the Dollhouse* was eleven-year-old Dawn Wiener, an ugly duckling with stern, oversized glasses, a gangly strut, a chirpy voice, and the sadly defeated frown of a middle-aged woman. God only knows, and only the Moral Majority cares, which character is this *auteur*'s alter ego in his latest picture.

What Solondz is sore about in *Happiness*, however, is clearer: the sexually-cum-romantically dysfunctional American landscape—a suburban world that is at once blandly familiar and almost surreal, a moral darkness or hellfire on the very edge of town. The very edge of town in this alternately dark comedy and pathetic tragedy of desire and despair is located, of course, in New Jersey, where the three thirtysomething Jordan sisters, Joy, Helen, and Trish, live. Not yet unhappy, perky Trish is a housewife with a husband, Bill, who's a psychiatrist, and three children, most notably eleven-year-old Billy. Glamorous Helen, unmarried, is a melancholy, self-dramatizing writer who invents pornographic traumas in her past to feed her poetry, and who complains from her New Jersey apartment, "I hate Saturday nights. Everybody wants me. You have no idea." Also unmarried, but looking for love in all the wrong places, is more or less careerless Joy, the family dartboard, who resides in her parents' home while they spend retirement winters down in Florida—where, at father Lenny's instigation, he and his wife, Mona, are in the process of separating.

Two of the three sisters, Helen and Joy, are integral to *Happiness*' manifold narrative, whereas Trish fades into the background as husband Bill moves to the center of her story strand. The two opening scenes set the grimly amusing tone for, as well as introduce the most prominent players in, the rest of the film's action. The first of these begins with an immense close-up of the tremulous Joy in a tacky restaurant, where she

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is trying to break up with her overweight, nerdy boyfriend Andy. The meal is finished and, to top it off, he has even brought an expensive gift for Joy; instead he gets dumped in as kindly a manner imaginable. Then *Happiness* suddenly veers from sentimental romance to mordant satire when the tearful, suicidal Andy plaintively asks, in the cliché-ridden, angst-obsessed argot of the middle class that runs through this film, "Is it someone else?" and Joy matter-of-factly answers, "No, it's just you."

The second scene occurs in the office of Trish's husband, psychiatrist Bill Maplewood, where Allen, a plump and miserable mouth-breather with ugly glasses as well as flat, greasy hair, describes—in the terms of porno magazine fantasy—his unrequited lust for a neighbor in his apartment building. That neighbor turns out to be Helen Jordan, whom he titillates with obscene phone calls by night as he boozes and masturbates. The joke here seems obvious because, just as Allen says he must be boring Dr. Maplewood with his story, the bored doctor goes over in his mind, in voiceover, the laundry list of things he has to do after work. The real joke, however, is retrospective: for we learn that Bill Maplewood would have been very interested in Allen's story, indeed, had it been homosexually pedophilic in nature.

This is a man, you see, who masturbates to pre-teen boys' magazines in the backseat of his car; who asks his son Billy, himself becoming sexually itchy, whether he knows how to masturbate and, if not, offers to instruct him; and who drugs his whole family and Billy's sleepover friend, the effeminate Johnny Grasso, so that he can sodomize the visiting youngster. So drugged was Bill's wife, Trish, that the next morning, in yet another blissfully sick joke, she thinks that she and her husband had sex the night before for the first time in several years! When Dr. Maplewood sees his own psychotherapist about his and Trish's "sexual incompatibility," as well as about the homicidal fantasies he has been having, the scene is shot by the cinematographer Maryse Alberti in *Happiness*' typically (and fittingly) lackluster color, but with an imaginative crane maneuver that pulls away from Bill's prosaic exterior until the camera reaches parts unknown—which is a visual metaphor for the exact way in which this domestically satirical yet eerily frightening film works. Tellingly, Bill doesn't discuss his pedophilic compulsions with his psychiatrist, and by the end of *Happiness* his sodomy is discovered by Johnny Grasso's physician, the police come calling, and the otherwise unrepentant father, in response to Billy's question, "Would you ever fuck me?" pensively tells his son, "No, I'd masturbate instead."

Allen may continue to masturbate as well, for his one meeting with the sexually adventurous Helen, at her request, ended in his almost instantaneous rejection. And Kristina, a homely, oversized woman across the hall who is even more sexually desperate than Allen and with whom he had begun a tentative if felicitous affair, may continue her masturbatory ways in prison, as she has been arrested for murdering the building's doorman after he raped her. There might be Joy for Allen, however: after the disaster with Andy and a one-night stand with a

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larcenous, philandering Russian taxi driver, Joy agrees to a blind date with Allen (to be arranged by her solicitous sister Helen!).

Their father, Lenny, for his part is still with Mona at the movie's conclusion, though this self-admitted "feelingless" sixty-five-year-old has already had one dalliance with a sex-starved, middle-aged divorcée and remains on the prowl. In *Happiness*' concluding scene, Lenny sits at the dinner table down in Florida with his wife and daughters, including Trish, who has understandably left the soon-to-be-jailed Bill and taken their three children with her. The oldest one, Billy, standing on the balcony of his grandparents' condominium, sees a shapely young woman in a bikini sunning herself below by the pool, masturbates, and, for the first time, achieves orgasm. As he goes in to report his achievement proudly to the other Jordans with the picture's last line, "I came!" the family dog licks Billy's semen from the balcony rail, then goes inside and licks Trish's face. Up comes the parodically tepid "Happiness" theme—which has shared the soundtrack with the ironically deployed, sprightly classical music of Vivaldi and Mozart, on the one hand, and such equally contrapuntal, saccharine popular songs as "Mandy" and "You Light Up My Life," on the other—and the film is over.

It's no accident that masturbation—with a minimum of two graphic ejaculations—is routinely practiced by three or four characters in *Happiness*, and by at least one in *Your Friends and Neighbors*. For onanism is the ultimate act of self-love as well as self-gratification, and the sexual self is what nearly every one of these characters seems to think about all the time, to the exclusion of virtually anything else. This naturally makes them figures of fun or objects of scorn—which is precisely the filmmakers' point, about them as well as about American society as a whole.

If it's argued that *Happiness* and *Your Friends and Neighbors* in reality reflect only a small portion of the U.S. population, it can be countered that this is the way in which our country at this time *thinks of* itself, *visualizes* itself in the mass media, or in any case is tacitly eager to be *shocked at* itself. The same argument has been made against Restoration comedy—that it did not truly represent Restoration society. Nonetheless, such was the theater the society of the period relished, and that, like all good art, tells us by implication, contrast, or omission as much about other segments of the population—in this case the Puritans of late-seventeenth-century England—as about the upper class it depicts.

Perhaps the real question about *Happiness* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, apart from their social representativeness, is whether they are "good" works of art or examples of what William Wimsatt once called "vile art": art that presents immoral acts irresponsibly, if not with approval and joy. In a reworking of Wimsatt's related term, the intentional fallacy, critics of Neil LaBute, for instance, have called him "acridly misanthropic," "cleverly malignant," and "cheaply titillating." But can he himself be so described, or are such pejorative adjectives better directed at his characters, by whom he seems simultaneously fascinated and repelled? In other words, are LaBute's critics confusing

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the messenger with the message of this "modern immorality tale" (the movie's subtitle), the moral intent of its author with the rapacious sexuality or solipsistic vanity displayed by his characters?

Todd Solondz is another matter, because his chief predator preys on children, and Solondz appears to have fun with, or make light of, his character's pedophilia: Dr. Maplewood's interactions with little Billy, for example, read like a prurient send-up of the father-son chats in "Leave It to Beaver." ("You'll come one day, you'll see!" exclaims Bill to his disheartened pubescent.) At the same time, however, Bill Maplewood is portrayed as a loving family man who knows, and says, that he is sick yet can do nothing about it. We are clearly meant to sympathize, if not identify, with him, and surely there can be no more shocking view of such a doctor than an understanding one. Hence the sometimes unbearable tension between normality and deviance, comedy and tragedy, alien distance and fellow feeling, in the scenes that feature this central character.

I don't mean by this that the film lightly glosses over or omits entirely the grim consequences of Bill Maplewood's crimes of molestation, as some of Solondz's critics believe. What I do mean is that his homosexual, pedophilic obsession is put on the same satiric-pathetic level with the carnal obsessions of the other, heterosexual characters, and is thus made to seem more representative than aberrant. Indeed, this doctor's iniquitous behavior is placed on a *higher* level because, unlike the rest of the people in *Happiness*, he's consciously aware of his particular malady—an awareness that confers a certain measure of sad dignity on his tortured, doomed, destructive self. Especially as Bill Maplewood is courageously acted by Dylan Baker, who, without the safety net of repentance and reform, chillingly balances this man's grave, contemplative, medical mien against his unbalanced, benighted mental state.

In a movie whose acting could easily and ridiculously have gone "over the top," everyone else—from Jane Adams (Joy), Lara Flynn Boyle (Helen), Cynthia Stevenson (Trish), Ben Gazzara (Lenny), and Louise Lasser (Mona) to Philip Seymour Hoffman (Allen), Rufus Read (Billy), Camryn Manheim (Kristina), Jon Lovitz (Andy), and Evan Silverberg (Johnny Grasso)—fills his or her role to the brim with a sense both of internal conviction and external connection, of individual commitment and ensemble integration. As in Dylan Baker's case, this took more effort than most cinematic characterizations on account of *Happiness*' subject matter, particularly for the youngsters Read and Silverberg.

I don't know how Solondz got their parents' permission to use them in this savage comedy of manners (or lack thereof!), but the fact that he did may tell us more about the realism of *Happiness*' world than we'd like to know. No one would want to live in such a world, yet somehow, I suspect, we all do. And Todd Solondz has been brazen enough to say so—sniggeringly to tell us, like his coeval Neil LaBute and unlike the merely narcissistic, provincially Manhattanite Woody Allen, who our friends and neighbors really are.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Theatre in London

THE FAILURE OF LEONARD BERNSTEIN'S MUSICAL VERSION of Voltaire's *Candide* in 1956 was a setback for the American theatre. Expectations were high. Bernstein already had two Broadway musical hits to his credit, but more important, like Gershwin he was bridging the gap between serious and popular music, bringing sophistication to his scores without losing vigor or popular appeal. His pungent yet romantic style seemed particularly suited to Voltaire's droll satire. Lyrics were by Richard Wilbur, our finest dramatic poet (his translations of Molière are a model of excellence), but there were also contributions from the likes of Dorothy Parker and James Agee. The book was by Lillian Hellman, not a great dramatist, but certainly a skillful pro who was several cuts above most musical comedy librettists. The show was directed by the flamboyant genius Tyrone Guthrie, with sets by the veteran dance, musical, and opera designer Oliver Smith. Everyone was expecting a breakthrough piece, perhaps something on a par with Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, a genuine opera rising out of the musical comedy tradition.

Nevertheless, *Candide* ran only seventy-three performances; another production in London three years later managed only sixty. Critics praised Bernstein's dazzling score, but the book meandered and dragged. Hellman's initial attempts to draw parallels to American politics of the fifties had been softened, while the blunt sexual content of Voltaire's novel had been toned down as well. Some traced the show's problems back to Voltaire, however, with Richard Wilbur maintaining that "it's a one joke novel that goes on for thirty chapters." There had never been a significant stage adaptation of *Candide* prior to this one. A picaresque novel with a dozen locations on two continents and the high seas was not particularly stageworthy, at a time when realism still dominated the theatre.

A concert version of the show later toured the country with success, the original cast recording was a hit, and there have been numerous full-scale revivals, always with a reworked book. Hugh Wheeler wrote a completely new one for Hal Prince in 1973, a coarse version that stressed the farcical elements at the expense of the philosophy, which worked at the box office; the show ran 740 performances. Prince's brilliant environmental staging, with ramps, bridges, platforms, and trap doors all over the reconstructed Broadway Theatre, was another reason for the success, as were some additional lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

Subsequent productions have used the Wheeler/Prince version, but

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usually with further tinkering with the book. The latest major production, which opened at the Royal National Theatre in London in April, finally has a book that works dramatically, yet preserves the sophistication and zest of Voltaire's novel. Wheeler's libretto used Voltaire himself as a narrator, which not only restored the deadpan humor of the narrative, but also helped to pull the sprawling piece together. In his adaptation of the libretto for the current production, director John Caird has kept Voltaire, but added the brilliant stroke of having him step in and out of the action to play Dr. Pangloss. This seemed like a perverse idea at first, but gradually I came to realize how much Voltaire, for all the hard-edged satire of *Candide*, has great affection for his characters. He hates Pangloss's optimistic philosophy, but he loves silly, good-hearted Pangloss himself. This is why he cannot bear to have Pangloss die on the gibbet; the character just will not die in his imagination. And by the way, isn't *Candide* a two-joke piece? The recurrent trashing of Candide's pollyannaism is one running gag, but the way characters return to life after being pox infected, stabbed, shot, gang-raped, partially cannibalized, or hanged is surely another. There is something of a Pangloss in Voltaire's psyche.

Caird's staging of *Candide*, on the bare, circular thrust stage at the National's large Olivier Theatre, was minimalist, which kept the action moving briskly. Locales were suggested by a few simple props; for a shipboard scene, for example, one actor held a ship's wheel, while he and all the others onstage swayed, as did a lantern flown in from above. In another scene, when Voltaire announced, "It started to snow," he tossed a handful of artificial snow over Candide's head. Paul Pyant's superb, ever-changing lighting also helped evoke the multitudinous locations.

Every directorial choice, then, aimed at making the show dramatic. The story line was clear, the pacing fast, the narration witty, the acting superb. Simon Russell Beale played Voltaire and Pangloss. An actor little known in the United States, Beale, not yet forty, is emerging as the finest British actor of his generation, to quote an article in the London *Times*. Tubby and homely, he nonetheless is a wonderful presence onstage, with an expressive, blubbery face and naïve appeal. He is particularly good playing charming villains, like Richard III, Iago, or Mosca in *Volpone*, but he has also succeeded in a number of unlikely roles, like Osvald in *Ghosts*. In *Candide*, he of course looked nothing like the real, scrawny Voltaire, but in his eighteenth-century costume, Beale strongly resembled Samuel Johnson, seeming to be of the period in the fullest sense, an Enlightenment intellectual full of zesty self-confidence and camaraderie.

The rest of the cast matched Beale in their skill and exuberance. Daniel Evans was a delightful Candide, forever spellbound, forever appealing. Alex Kelly was a hilarious Cunégonde; beauty and comic ability rarely come together so well in an actress. During "Glitter and Be

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Gay," she piled on jewels and rope after rope of pearls until she practically disappeared.

The comedy, however, undermined the music. Her singing was competent, but she does not have a truly operatic voice. I was disappointed to experience one of my favorite arias regressing into good comic *shtick*! (I laughed all the way through it, but when I got home, I put Dawn Upshaw's version on the stereo.) All the actors seemed to have been cast for their acting, rather than for their singing. Well spoken, with strong abilities in characterization and comic business, they could all sing at least adequately, but only one or two could have stepped into a production of *Candide* at the Met. The orchestra, conducted by Mark W. Dorrell, was similarly disappointing. Bernstein was displeased that the otherwise successful Hal Prince production used an orchestra of only thirteen musicians; raising the number to fourteen here would hardly have placated him. Perhaps I am prejudiced by the many orchestral versions that have been recorded, but the brilliant overture sounded anemic. Wonder of wonders, the musical that is notorious for its book problems had become a successful play, with incidental music.

But what a splendid score *Candide* has! Much of it parodies nineteenth-century opera and operetta, yet it stands as fine music on its own. "Glitter and Be Gay," for example, is a takeoff on the "Jewel Song" from Gounod's *Faust*, yet it is a terrific aria itself, which has become part of the standard soprano repertoire. Like Voltaire, Bernstein loves what he is ridiculing, which is the secret of success for both of them.

Conor McPherson's award-winning *The Weir* breaks all the rules of playwriting. There is extensive exposition, hardly any conflict, and no plot. His fellow Irish playwright (and exact contemporary at age twenty-eight) Martin McDonagh writes traditional, tightly plotted, Aristotelian drama, but McPherson's approach is non-Western. *The Weir* is an Irish Noh play. The juxtaposition is not so far-fetched as it sounds. The connection between Irish and Japanese theatre goes back to the early twentieth century, when Yeats, introduced to the Japanese drama by Ezra Pound, staged Irish legends in the Noh style. His Noh plays influenced later Irish playwrights like Beckett and Friel. McPherson uses a basically naturalistic style, but introduces characters and plot elements that are reminiscent of Noh.

The play is set in a rural Irish pub, familiar territory for Irish drama these days, with equally familiar foul-mouthed locals who can scarcely utter a noun without a "fecking" in front of it. They drink and chat in the dim light about local matters, making me wonder if anything was ever going to happen in this apparently aimless *tranche de vie*. Then a local realtor and restaurateur, another regular at the pub, comes in with an attractive Dublin woman in her thirties, who has just rented a house in the neighborhood. The question of whether the house is haunted leads to a series of ghost stories about the town, the kind of thing that

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Garrison Keillor might have written if he were Irish, loaded with eccentric details, endlessly digressive, and very funny.

Then the woman tells a ghost story of her own, about the death of her little girl, who is in effect haunting her. The death was purely accidental, no one's fault, yet the woman is tormented with fear and guilt. (Left unsaid is the fact that it has shattered her marriage, which is why she has come to this village alone, in search of peace and quiet.) She even received a strange phone call, in which she thought she could hear her daughter in some frightening limbo, calling for help. Was this real, or a hallucination, brought on by her overwrought state? The question remains unanswered, but telling her emotional story to the sympathetic strangers seems to restore her to a degree of calm.

Narrative, ghosts, and exorcism are all typical of Noh. This form of drama, associated with the Buddhist religion, is static and lyrical; there are a chorus, two principal characters, and occasional subordinate ones. The protagonist (often a woman) usually recites a long fervent story to a witness. The storytelling is an emotional and spiritual release for the protagonist, who has been trapped in limbo, unable to be reincarnated. As in *The Weir*, all conflict is within the central character, rather than between characters. In Japan, I was embarrassed to admit that my attention sometimes wandered during Noh plays, only to learn that the Japanese often doze as well, that the numb trance that the Noh induces is intentional. Unlike Western drama, which seeks to catch you up in the action, the Noh is distant, mysterious, an art "object" to be contemplated at leisure.

Royall Tyler, in his recent edition of Noh dramas, notes that there is a long tradition of *monogurui* ("madman" or "madwoman") plays, and that many plays focus on a parent separated from a child.[1] (The most famous of these, *Sumida-gawa*, became the basis for Benjamin Britten's opera *Curlew River*.) The static nature of *The Weir*, functioning through narrative rather than action, confused the critics (including me), but the play has nonetheless drawn large audiences in both London and New York. Perhaps this success is the result of the way the play captures the mesmerizing quality of Noh. Valerie can be seen as a *monogurui*, and her monologue can be seen as more than just a sad little tale, but as a means of releasing her from torment. If the other characters are the equivalent of witness and chorus, then the play is an exorcism ritual in which all are partaking, including the audience. It is an unusual experience for a Western theatregoer, but an aesthetically fulfilling one.

Much of the gratification came from the superb quality of the acting. I saw the show in London with replacements, since the original actors had gone with the show to New York, but although a second cast, they were not second rate. Cathy White was spellbinding as Valerie, while Niall Buggy was equally compelling as Jack, the barroom cynic who

[1] *Japanese Nō Dramas* (London, 1992), p. 251.

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nonetheless turns out to be her most sympathetic listener. But basically, *The Weir* is an ensemble piece, so that all deserve praise for providing a sense of familiarity, camaraderie, and small-town Irish affability. Ian Rickson directed competently, while Rae Smith designed a setting that looked both ordinary and spooky. Paule Constable's lighting, however, was too dim, a Pyrrhic victory of atmosphere over visibility.

The best new play of the London season never made it to the West End. Simon Gray's *The Late Middle Classes,* directed by Harold Pinter, had a successful provincial tour in the spring, with good critical notices, but died out of town. I managed to catch it in its final week, at the Richmond Theatre, a beautifully restored Edwardian playhouse facing a park in a London suburb.

The play is set in the south of England in 1952. There is a double setting: on the audience's left, a bright, cheery living room in the home of a pathologist, Charles Smithers, and his wife and young son; on the right, a dark, gloomy room in the house of the boy's music teacher, Thomas Brownlow, an Austrian refugee living with his grouchy, tipsy mother. The dual locales are symbolic; behind an ordinary façade, this is a play of hidden desires and buried emotions.

Nothing much happens in Act I, except a depiction of an apparently happy middle-class family, epitomizing family values of the 1950s. The husband is a hard-working, respected professional; the tennis-playing wife is devoted to her husband and son; the boy himself is a capable pianist and a promising student, cramming for a scholarship to a prestigious prep school. Yet there are forbidding signs. The tricks the mother plays on her son—such as pretending to be dead!—are a bit over the edge, even for an English eccentric. Furthermore, she is pushing the boy to win the scholarship, not for the benefits it will bring to him, but for those it will bring to her; not having to pay school fees will enable the family to afford to live in London, escaping the provincial backwater she despises. She also repeatedly pressures the boy to say that he loves her, like some unbalanced, jealous mistress. The father's occupation as a pathologist seems ominous, even to him, while the music teacher's obsessive interest in the boy, who is talented but hardly a prodigy, seems threatening. Nevertheless, all the characters remain sympathetic, while the dialog exhibits Gray's customary wit.

In the second act, revelations and reversals come thick and fast. The only actual wrongdoing is the infidelity of Dr. Smithers, who has been having a brief affair with his receptionist, but the near-transgressions are manifold, and are all the more disturbing for not actually being carried out. The characters reveal themselves in all their fears, prejudices, and sexual repression; Dr. Smithers' latent homophobia and anti-Semitism, for example, are more shocking than his meaningless sexual relationship with a woman who is described as both unattractive and shallow. Through the turbulent second act, the boy, Holly, seems an island of sanity and decency, defending hapless Brownlow (who never molests

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him, and is the soul of kindness) against his father's increasingly wild accusations. Nevertheless, the play is framed by a prolog and epilog set in 1982, with grown-up Holly visiting old Brownlow in his same, gloomy living room, where it becomes clear that the awful experiences of three decades earlier scarred the boy emotionally. In fact, he has become like his father (underlined in performance by being played by the same actor); he has given up his music and become a physician himself (though a psychiatrist rather than a pathologist), exhibiting the same awkward, uptight attitudes that characterized his parent. You wonder how good a psychiatrist he could possibly be.

Despite its quiet first act, *The Late Middle Classes* seizes hold of you from the first moment. The characters are masterfully drawn, managing to seem both unusual and typical. The play is full of subtleties and surprises, both funny and poignant, with superb confrontations. The one between husband and wife at the beginning of Act II, when she fakes a story of an old love affair in revenge for his current fling, is especially well done. The period atmosphere is perfect, with all the nastiness, conformity, and suspicion that we older folk can remember of the smug fifties, which conservatives now wishfully describe as a golden age.

Pinter directed with his usual skill—there is no better background for a stage director than playwriting and acting—giving the production clarity, variety, and force. The superb cast included Nicholas Woodeson (the most protean actor in the world) as Brownlow; Harriet Walter (author of a much-acclaimed new book on acting) as the mother; Angela Pleasance as Brownlow's mother; James Fleet as Dr. Smithers and the mature Holly. It took a fair amount of chutzpah to put on a play requiring a boy who can play the piano and act, but the producers actually found two, the brothers Sam and Alex Bedi, who alternated as Holly. Sets by Eileen Diss, and costumes by Dany Everett, captured the characters and the period wonderfully.

So why did this fine play, by a distinguished playwright, in a worthy production, close? The press office of the producing organization (Turnstyle Group) was unable to give much of an answer. Not commercial enough (then why produce it in the first place?), and no West End theatres available (though the Barbican was closed from May until October, the Mermaid was empty, etc.). With its traditional dramaturgy (one critic called it "Rattiganesque"), *The Late Middle Classes* was hardly something that West End audiences would have found obscure. Its first act may be static, but *The Weir* is static throughout, yet packs in audiences in both New York and London.

This failure, then, is a disturbing sign. Simon Gray sent me a note saying that, while of course he regrets the loss of the money, the West End has become "a nasty place to be." Another of his recent plays, *Cell Mates*, despite mostly good reviews, was forced to close when one of the leading actors quit without notice. Is Gray just having an incredible run

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of bad luck, or are these closings a symptom of underlying weakness in the last remaining commercial venue for serious drama in English?

Robert Lepage, the French-Canadian director-guru, collaborates with his actors on the scripts of his plays. Rewriting continues as the production evolves; I reviewed his splendid *Seven Streams of the River Ota* in 1997, after they had tinkered with it for three years, expanding it from three hours to seven, in performances in a dozen countries. This time, I caught his new piece, *Geometry of Miracles*, near the beginning of the process, at the Royal National Theatre in London. It has a long way to go.

Geometry chronicles the career of Frank Lloyd Wright from 1929, when he was commissioned to do the Johnson Wax office block in Racine, Wisconsin, through to his death in 1959, as he was completing the Guggenheim Museum of Art in New York. Further scenes after his death follow events in the lives of his family and his associates through 1985. Lepage seems mainly interested in Wright's influence by avant-garde, gymnastic dance in the twenties and thirties, like the *mime corporel* of Decroux and the biomechanics of Meyerhold. His third wife, Olgivanna, had studied with the esoteric crackpot Georgi Gurdjieff at his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man near Paris, where such dance was taught along with other avant-garde art forms. In *Geometry* we thus get a lot of actors lurching about in rhythmic unison, more or less celebrating Wright's genius, but how, specifically, Gurdjieff may have affected Wright is never clear.

The usual problem with collaborative playmaking is that characterization takes precedence over plot; actors are typically more interested in their own roles than in the play as a whole. Here, even the characters seemed sketchy. It was like Lepage's dreadful production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* seven years ago, also at the Royal National Theatre, where characterization and story line were completely sacrificed to splashy visual effects. (Literally. The setting consisted of a pool of mud.) Here, there were vast open settings (designed by Carl Fillion) to evoke the Arizona desert, where Beelzebub appeared, stark naked, to inspire Wright. We saw prehistoric paintings, the New York City skyline, a nude male pas de deux, and a big white sphere that turned into an eyeball, but there were precious few actual Wright designs, whether on paper or in realization.

A more fundamental problem was the lack of conflict in the play. Wright's stormy personal life, his three wives and many affairs—and many children, both legitimate and illegitimate—had dwindled down to a bored man wandering about, making dry comments. His professional conflicts with the International School had dwindled down to his swatting flies and calling them Van der Rohe, Gropius, and Le Corbusier. I would have much preferred them in human form, since their differences with Wright are fundamental in modern architecture.

Wright was played by Tony Guilfoyle, who looked like the architect,

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but who spoke in a tight, nasal monotone, with an American accent coming from somewhere east of the Hudson River rather than the Midwest. (Just as American actors think that there are only two English accents, cockney and upper class, so weak English actors playing Americans end up sounding Texan or Brooklynese.) I attended a Wright lecture at M.I.T. forty years ago, shortly before his death. Yes, he did have a dry, acerbic manner, but even in his nineties he was more animated and penetrating than this actor.

The advantage of Lepage's method is that he will rework the piece, perhaps drastically. Certainly there is the potential for somebody to create a good play about Frank Lloyd Wright. But it is important to remember that no matter how avant-garde you are, drama is storytelling through action. Lepage has not yet found a story here.

Coming in the Winter issue—

Contemporary British poets

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ROBERT S. CLARK

International Festival: Bergen, Norway

BERGEN, NORWAY, HAS BEEN SELECTED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION to be one of nine cities to open the millennium as a European City of Culture 2000. The stated aim of the designation is that the nine will be the focal points of local, regional, and national culture, which will radiate from these centers to the Continent and beyond. The attractive little coastal town thus joins such cosmopolitan hubs as Bologna, Brussels, Helsinki, and Prague as an arena for European musical, theatrical, literary, and visual-arts activity to mark the millennium.

Why Bergen? After all, this out-of-the-way town of some 220,000 is hardly more than a dot on the map compared to a teeming international destination such as Prague, with its population of better than 1.1 million. The answer was abundantly clear during a weeklong visit I paid in May to the Bergen International Festival, a thirteen-day multifaceted celebration of the performing arts in as many as seventeen varied local venues, with fare ranging from Samuel Beckett and Gypsy bands to flamenco, circus acts, and excerpts from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung.*

The town has musical associations galore. Edvard Grieg lived not far from here, as did the twentieth-century composer Harald Saeverud. The violin virtuoso Ole Bull, who wowed European courts and audiences in the mid-nineteenth century, built a Moorish-style summer home on a bucolic island south of here. The Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra is Norway's oldest and one of the oldest in Europe.

The scope of the Festival beggars description. Because it does not rely upon the most sought-after artists on the international circuit, calling instead on those, particularly of Scandinavian origin, just forging an international career, it trusts to diversity and the unusual for its drawing power. Where else might you expect to see and hear a Beckett retrospective, a Bartók opera, Andalusian music from Morocco, a Portuguese dance company performing to the music of J. S. Bach, medieval music from the archives of Santiago di Compostello—and Mozart's "Prague" Symphony? My count was 73 separate events in all, many of them repeated.

This observer's target was musical, but I did manage to take in one or two nonmusical events. Most memorable was the solo reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* by the Irish actress Fiona Shaw, directed by Deborah Warner of Britain's Royal National Theatre. On a stage at

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Bergen's National Theater, bare except for some sources of lighting, and with a minimum of simple props, Ms. Shaw created a riveting and richly varied series of poetic tableaux. While she enunciated every one of the words clearly, she never betrayed a trace of academic reverence for this most hallowed of modernist texts. She could be alternately an Oxbridge lecturer, a suburban London matron, a Cockney barkeep, a frightened adolescent, an East End tart, and the dispassionate voice of the world-weary onlooker. The abruptly shifting *mise en scènes* and the variety of personae were precisely suited to the poem's found-object form. The effect was powerful, and enhanced by the wise choice of a small performing space. But while one could have nothing but admiration for Ms. Shaw in this tour de force, her very success left at least one grateful member of the audience questioning whether the poem is, as the program put it, "a milestone of modern poetry" or a pretentious sham.

The remaining theater programs included performances of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days*, *Footfalls*, and *Rockaby*, a dramatization of Kafka's *The Trial*, a one-man show by the Canadian Daniel McIver and another based on texts by Pier Paolo Pasolini by Theatergroep Hollandia's Jerven Williams.

The music I heard ranged from solo recitals and chamber ensembles to full orchestral performances and from standard fare (a Grieg quartet, Sibelius' Violin Concerto) to the outrageously antic "avant-garde." Most had either a Scandinavian artist or a work by a Scandinavian composer to offer. Two evenings devoted to works by the Norwegians Saeverud and Arne Nordheim (and one to Elliott Carter and his American contemporaries) were among those that I had to forgo.

The first concert I attended yielded one of the most satisfying performances of my visit. It served to introduce Christian Eggen, the musician in residence, artistic director of the Oslo Sinfonietta, and the driving force behind many of the festival's programs. The youngish pianist, conductor, and composer played keyboard works solo for the evening's first half, offering at the outset elegant though slightly muted renderings of Beethoven's Six Bagatelles, Op. 126. The Piano Suite, Op. 45, by Carl Nielsen that followed seemed to suit him better: its playfulness, shifting harmonies, and occasionally almost obsessive chordal passages, scales, and figurations were set forth with bravura eloquence. But Chopin's languid *Barcarolle*, Op. 60, a piece that speaks of sheer beauty, was too often prosaic. At moments it seemed as if he were in a hurry to bring it to a close and get off stage.

And perhaps he was, because when he returned after intermission he brought with him three young Norwegian string players, the violinist Atle Sponberg, the violist Nora Takdaal, and the cellist Hendrik Brendstrup. Together this foursome gave Brahms's G Minor Piano Quartet, Op. 25, a rousing, beautifully shaped, purposefully inflected reading, easily the best I have ever heard of this great work. In the first movement, which begins matter-of-factly but soon moves onto danger-

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ous terrain, Eggen's piano set a level of measured intensity that challenged the strings to keep up. They did, admirably, throughout the work's four movements, sometimes even overpowering their leader momentarily. But the authority with which the players rendered the proposal-and-response agenda that is so prominent in the music was immense. The dash of the *Rondo alla Zingarese presto* finale was goose-bump-making.

As is the current custom, many of the events mixed music with pedagogy. One that did so successfully and enjoyably was a morning trip to Lysoen, Bull's summer home on an island an hour by boat from Bergen. Here, in the ornate and idiosyncratic drawing room designed—as was the entire structure—by an inventive architect to the musician's specifications as an orgy of carved fretwork, braided and twisted columns, and gables with intricate knotty pine openwork, including what looks like the Star of David, in the supports, the audience heard violinist Nils Økland and pianist Steinar Pedersen in works by Bull, Grieg, Liszt, and others. Interspersed was a demonstration by Økland of the Hardanger fiddle, a folk instrument, and all was laced together by a charming narrative of Bull's life and times by an attractive young woman in native Norwegian garb.

The Hardanger fiddle (Hardanger is a region of southern Norway) proved more than a curiosity. With as many as six sympathetic strings that resonate with its four bowed strings, it figures prominently in Norway's folk music as the instrument for which a body of tunes called *slätter* was created by rural musicians. In the nineteenth century, Grieg's compatriot Johan Halvorsen (1864–1935) went into the field and transcribed many of the tunes—impressively, since they are intricately decorated—simply by hearing them. Grieg adapted Halvorsen's transcriptions for piano, and the high point of the recital was the *slätt* "The Girls of Kivledal" played first by Økland on the fiddle and then in Grieg's transcription by Pedersen.

One feature that distinguishes Bergen from other summer festivals is the quantity of contemporary music that is presented. In addition to a number of new music groups, the traditional ensembles played new works. The New Helsinki Quartet sandwiched a string quartet by the Finnish composer Veli-Matti Puumala between Janácek's "Kreutzer Sonata" Quartet and Grieg's G Minor Quartet. It proved to be a compendium of postmodern compositional practices: *glissandi*, plucked strings, harmonics, off-string sounds, flirtations with quarter-tones. Some passages nodded at the twentieth century's string-quartet icon, Bela Bartók.

In other venues the story was the same: the occasional pearl dwelling among metaphorical swine. Assisted by an ensemble called Cikada, Eggen presided over a late afternoon of music by three living Norwegian composers, who talked about their works (in Norwegian). Jon Oivind Ness's *Interrupted Cycles* brought together a group of strings and winds with taped sequences and lighting effects in a mild diversion. It was

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followed by Cecilie Ore's *Lex Temporis*, an egregious mix of grossly overamplified tone clusters and strobe-lit tableaux of people grappling with instruments and one another for no apparent reason—an all-out assault on the auditory faculty. I could not stay for the final piece.

Music of this century of a very different stripe was the centerpiece of two programs by the Budapest Festival Orchestra under its music director Adam Fischer. In Bergen's chief concert hall, the Grieghallen, a monumentally ugly building with fine, clear, if somewhat bass-shy acoustics, Fischer led programs including two searing Bartók scores: a concert performance of the one-act opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911), his only work in this idiom, and the full score of his ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1914–1917). These works, so closely related that the composer's colleague Zoltan Kodály described them as "fitting together like two movements of a huge symphony," are the prime examples of Bartók's rich, expansive early orchestral style, shot through with suggestions of the Hungarian folk music that was the object of field researches in Hungary and Romania by the two friends. The orchestra, under Fischer's supple, energetic direction, made these scores soar, rage, and lament in turn, wringing from them just about all the excitement and passion one could imagine their yielding. String tone was lush but firm, and the winds and brass spoke poignantly and forcefully. The two vocal soloists in the opera, the bass Kolos Kováts as Bluebeard and mezzo-soprano Ildiko Komlósi as his wife Judith, sang their stylized eight-syllable lines with aplomb, providing a kind of static center for the orchestral tumult framing them. The opera was preceded by a rather leisurely performance of Mozart's "Prague" Symphony by an ensemble reduced in size—there were close to 100 players on stage for the Bartók—and the ballet by a spirited and affectionate reading of Sibelius' Violin Concerto in which the young Norwegian Henning Kraggerud, despite some uncertain intonation, justified his rapidly growing European reputation.

There were other pleasurable evenings as well: Eggen and Leif Ove Andsnes, a Norwegian pianist now making a splash on the international scene, in an evening of piano transcriptions of Bach chorales, original piano music, and other music for small ensemble by the contemporary Hungarian composer György Kurtág; an Armenian evening featuring music by Komitas and Tigran Mansurjan for chorus, strings, percussion, and solo voices; and love songs by Francesco Landini sung by the Anonymous 4 quartet, to name only a few. Though it may strain credulity, the likelihood is that for Bergen 2000 the prospective pleasures will be even more plentiful.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Nijinsky in Translation

SHORTLY AFTER PUBLICATION OF THE NEW VERSION of Nijinsky's diaries,[1] Christopher Lydon invited Joan Acocella, the volume's editor, to appear on his National Public Radio talk show "The Connection." Here's how Lydon introduced the session:

> In 1909 the Russian-born dancer Vaslav Nijinsky was nineteen years old when he made his explosive debut in Paris with the Ballets Russes. From the start his performances were so highly sexualized and avant-garde they guaranteed him a place in dance history. The erotic choreography of Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* to the Stravinsky score triggered a riot in the aisles of the Champs-Elysées theater. Nijinsky was known for one other thing in his life—his infamous diary, written at the furious pace of a man losing his mind. He put his creative madness to paper over the course of six weeks. The diary was published after his death as a symbol of the brilliant but suffering artist, though his wife had pruned, rearranged and rewritten the diary to hide his obsessions and his bisexual past. Now sixty years later the whole story is being told.[2]

Lydon's clichéd rendition consigns the "new" Nijinsky to the crowded category of history's brilliant but suffering not to mention crazy artists. Though it supposedly improves on the sanitized and/or infamous previous publication, the recovered diary comes off in Lydon's eyes as the colorful but obsessive ravings of a misfit—nothing new in the literature of our times. Lydon also embellishes that other stanza of the Nijinsky legend, his eroticism. As if there were no scandals except sex scandals, he figures *The Rite of Spring* must have had salacious choreography, and he seems to have missed the important Nijinsky roles that didn't exploit sexuality, in *Les Sylphides*, *Petrouchka*, *Carnaval*, and *Giselle*, for instance.

Flaming snapshots are not new to the iconography of dance. In fact, they often attain the status of dance history. It's in the nature of dance that its practitioners—choreographers and dancers—have to rely on others to document what they do. Relatively few people sit in the theater

[1] THE DIARY OF VASLAV NIJINSKY: Unexpurgated Edition, ed. by *Joan Acocella*. Trans. from the Russian by *Kyril Fitzlyon*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $30.00.

[2] Transcript, "The Connection," WBUR (National Public Radio, Boston), 1 April 1999.

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and observe dancers with their own eyes. They alone take away some authentic experience, and even they can have capricious memories. What the rest of us think dance is, or was, depends on critics, interviewers, photographers, filmmakers, notators, publicists, and the images constructed offstage by the dancers themselves. It's no surprise when only the slickest common denominator comes to the surface.

The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky, edited by Romola Nijinsky, was first published in 1936, when its author had been disabled by mental illness for almost two decades—he was to live in this occluded state until 1950. His motivation for starting the diary, written in 1919 when he and his family were ensconced in St. Moritz at the end of World War I, seems to have been confessional. Converted to a saintly Tolstoyanism, and tortured by a guilty desire to atone for what he saw as his bad behavior in the past, he wanted the world to understand and forgive him. For five years, his personal misfortunes had been compounded by the upheavals of war; his erratic behavior was getting worse and couldn't be concealed. In St. Moritz he was undergoing interviews with a doctor and he suspected his wife intended to have him hospitalized. He realized his mind was coming apart, and he was trying to understand. Verbalizing his confusion may have been the only alternative to dancing it out, which was no longer possible.

For years after Nijinsky was institutionalized and the writing ceased, Romola Nijinsky envisioned the diary as a future bestseller, a solution to their financial needs. It would rectify the real and imaginary injustices done to her famous husband and reinforce his tragic legend. She succeeded in publishing her expurgated version only after strenuous networking among the elite patrons of ballet, including Lincoln Kirstein, and after her own biography of Vaslav appeared, in 1934.

By now the accumulated literature of the Diaghilev era gives us some perspective on the celebrated impresario, his dancers and the ballets that brought a classical art into the twentieth century. At least three serious biographies of Nijinsky have been published besides Romola's account, which ran to two volumes. There have been memoirs and tributes, and then the innumerable books on the art and times of Diaghilev. Joan Acocella's 1984 doctoral dissertation covered the early years of the Ballets Russes, the years of Nijinsky's eminence.[3] So it seems we should expect some insights we didn't have before in her edition of the diaries.

The full translation does indeed restore material censored by Romola Nijinsky. It runs to nearly 300 pages, a third longer than Romola's slim volume, and is organized differently, according to what seems to be the writer's original sequence. Acocella has restored passages that would have embarrassed Romola or exposed Nijinsky's priapic interests. She's

[3] Joan Ross Acocella, "The Reception of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes by Artists and Intellectuals in Paris and London, 1909–1914" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1984).

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also reinstated a whole section of letters and chants set in poetic form, as well as many pages of stream-of-consciousness wanderings that make poetic if not logical sense.

> I want to sleep, but my wife does not feel. She thinks in her sleep. I am not thinking, and therefore I will not go to sleep. I do not sleep because of the powders. They can give me any medicine they like, but I will not sleep. If they give me subcutaneous morphine injections, I will not sleep. I know my own habits. I like morphine, but I do not like death. Death is morphine. I am not morphine. My wife has taken a powder containing morphine and is therefore in a daze. She is not asleep. . . .[4]

Millennial readers are drawn to this kind of writing: apocalyptic, hallucinatory, preoccupied with the body's appetites and pathologies. We are incurably voyeuristic about the bathroom and bedroom habits of stars. And any mix of sensuality and mysticism is doubly provocative. Still, Nijinsky's prose, now fully revealed, is hard going. Reading it is like watching an autistic child rocking back and forth, back and forth, absorbed in the patterns of a speeding universe but unable to waylay them long enough to process into purposeful action. It's a terrible sight. We want to stop him, comfort him. But we know he's doomed.

Peter Ostwald, a professor of psychiatry, thoroughly explored the workings of Nijinsky's mind, through the diary and through extensive studies of the diagnoses and treatments to which the dancer was subjected.[5] His book is probably the definitive explanation of Nijinsky's psychosis. Ostwald also considered some of the ways in which Nijinsky's life as a dancer might have aggravated his clinical symptoms. As a performer, Nijinsky was used to role-playing, and his diary has powerful histrionic overtones. His life in the ballet required incessant practice and repetition of the same moves in order to perfect them, a process not unlike his verbal tics.

> I want to tell you that I love you you
> I want to tell you that I love you you
> I want to tell you that I love I love I love
> I want to tell you that I love I love I love.
> I love but you do not. You do not love that
> which He
> I love that He that He. You are death you are
> death.[6]

[4] *Diary*, p. 73.
[5] Peter Ostwald, *Vaslav Nijinsky: A Leap into Madness* (New York, 1991).
[6] *Diary*, p. 141.

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Nijinsky seems to have been cursed with bad genes—madness ran in his family—and science had not yet found ways to moderate the effects of schizophrenia and manic depression. His mind at the time of writing the diary must also have been burdened by a terrible dependency. Jobless and copeless, with a wife and child to support, the twenty-nine-year-old Nijinsky had never even had to take care of himself. He entered the Maryinsky theater school as a child. Lower-class parents prayed that their children would have the talent to be accepted in such schools; not only would they be educated and provided for, they would be assured of decent employment afterward. The precocious Nijinsky was taken into the Imperial Ballet while still a student; a couple of years later Diaghilev whisked him off to Paris.

Though he must have earned enormous fees from his dancing, he probably turned them over to his boss and lover Diaghilev. Romola was still litigating to recover them years after Nijinsky was dismissed for marrying her. Diaghilev encouraged him to choreograph, and never has a neophyte been so amply surrounded by high-powered collaborators and resources. Ousted from the Ballets Russes, he tried to take control of his artistic life. With no experience in business affairs and a distinctly unaggressive personality, he bungled badly. Others tried to help him start a school or a company, including his gifted sister Bronislava, but the war made such schemes impossible. Bronislava returned to revolutionary Russia; Vaslav and Romola were caught in Budapest as prisoners of war in the household of his overbearing mother-in-law.

Diaghilev, in possibly the most misguided act of his career besides the firing of Nijinsky, extricated the dancer from this predicament only to set him a more severe sentence. Otto Kahn of the Metropolitan Opera, principal backer of the 1916–17 Ballets Russes North American tour, had demanded Nijinsky's stellar presence as artistic-director, dancer, and choreographer. Nijinsky couldn't cope with any of it, and the tour was a failure although it remains in the mythology as one of only two opportunities Americans had to see the fabulous Ballets Russes. Even then, the company was making myths. Kirstein tells how, when he was an impressionable nine-year-old, his mother wouldn't let him see the company in Boston; ironically, he learned later that the performance he missed turned out to be one of those occasions when Alexander Gavrilov substituted for Nijinsky, unannounced.[7]

The Nijinskys returned to their temporary exile in St. Moritz. If, as Joan Acocella theorizes, Vaslav wanted above all to preserve his relationship with his wife, he must have realized that she was his sole lifeline at that point. In the diary, Nijinsky talks very little about dance, almost never about his fabulous early success or his later catastrophes. He's obsessed with sex, money, and the people around him—his wife and daughter Kyra, the servants, the doctor—and with his own identity in

[7] Lincoln Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing* (New York, 1975), p. 13.

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relation to the dominant figures in his life, Diaghilev and God. His fellow dancers remember him as inarticulate even before his decline. The ballerina Tamara Karsavina's reflection is typical: "Nijinsky had no gift of precise thought, still less that of expressing his ideas in adequate words."[8] Yet, once he embarked on the diary, he became fascinated with his own words and the effect they would have on others. After some irreverences about the Church and the Pope, he says:

> I speak crudely on purpose, so as to be better understood, but not in order to offend people. . . . Tolstoy was ashamed of being a writer, because he thought he was just a man. Man is a writer. A writer is a journalist. I like journalists who like people. Journalists who write nonsense are money. Money is journalists. I am a journal without money. I like journals. A journal is life. I am a journal in life. Man, journal, life, writer, tolstoy, dostoevsky.[9]

His endless reconfigurings of these identity markers seem to be his attempt to hold onto a persona that was slipping. They remind me of the black outlines with which van Gogh nailed down the shapes in his late paintings.

I'm not as convinced as Joan Acocella that Nijinsky might have been "trying to create a work of literature."[10] In fact, Acocella makes many claims in her introduction that tend to imprint the Nijinsky mythology more deeply, and even extend it. She tries to counter the common perception of Nijinsky's naiveté: "genius of dance, helpless in all else." He was well-read and even sophisticated, Acocella says, and "knew something about painting."[11] But when he refers to Russian authors, mainly Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, they're no more substantial than the frequent walk-on appearances of politicians who'd been in the war news. Nijinsky's familiarity with such figures is extremely selective. He's read their books in school, or learned of them in the newspapers or from hanging around Diaghilev's literary circle, but he derives only symbolic meanings from their lives. To make a case for Nijinsky as a product of the "intellectual trends of the day"[12] is like calling Joan of Arc a theologian.

The one thing Acocella does not address in her revaluation of Nijinsky is his choreography. She's resigned to the fact that choreography disappears only a little less instantaneously than dancing. "Of these works [*L'Après-midi d'un Faune, Jeux*, and *Le Sacre du Printemps*]," she says, "only one, *The Afternoon of a Faun*, survives today, but it is enough to show that Nijinsky ushered ballet into modernism."[13] Rather than probe for some idea about great choreography that outweighs scandals, accolades, and posthumous

[8] Tamara Karsavina, *Theatre Street* (New York, 1961), p. 237.
[9] *Diary*, p. 39.
[10] *Diary*, p. xxvi.
[11] *Diary*, pp. xxi–xxii.
[12] *Diary*, p. xl.
[13] *Diary*, p. xi.

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canonizations, she insists on Nijinsky's genius while asserting that "never was so much artistic fame based on so little evidence."[14]

Nijinsky's "father of modernism" label may have been initiated by Kirstein. As early as 1935 he ventured that as a choreographer Nijinsky "either demonstrated or implied theories as profound as have ever been articulated about the classic theatrical dance."[15] By 1970 seventeen works by nine choreographers occupied Kirstein's pantheon of twentieth-century greats,[16] and three of the four Nijinsky ballets made it onto that select list. These three, *Faune*, *Jeux*, and *Sacre*, were all originals, way outside any of the Ballets Russes' self-made modernist formulas, before or after Nijinsky. But fate didn't allow him to follow up these ballets; they might have started a revolution or they might have been meteoric accidents. Nijinsky had no direct successors other than his soul-mate sister Bronislava, nor can his influence on other individuals, styles, or schools be clearly identified. Balanchine, Tudor, Ashton and Robbins were all much more instrumental in creating modern ballet.

Once Nijinsky was expelled from the Ballets Russes, his ballets were too. They were oddities in their own time, and one can only imagine what kind of a repertory he'd have had to collect around them if he'd been capable of assembling another company—the nine-minute *Faune*, archaic in style, provocative in theme; the sexually ambiguous *Jeux*; the gigantic and inconceivable *Sacre*; and the strange, pantomimic and possibly unfinished *Tyl Eulenspiegel*. Nijinsky planned other ballets that never came to fruition, and during his more lucid periods in Switzerland he devised a notation system and recorded at least one of his finished works, *Faune*.

Acocella is willing to leave all of this in the mythological realm, along with Nijinsky's dancing, which seems never to have been filmed. And in a footnote, she adds the opinion that "there have been attempted reconstructions . . . but the choreographic evidence is so meager that these productions must be considered constructions rather than reconstructions."[17] Acocella, who became the dance critic of *The New Yorker* in 1998, has adopted her predecessor Arlene Croce's regrettable habit of not naming those whose work she considers substandard. Acocella's dismissive remark about the extant or revived Nijinsky oeuvre clarifies nothing, not even the nature of the supposedly credible *Faune* on which she plants his choreographic reputation.

Faune is the only ballet in Nijinsky's notation that has been found. The notators Ann Hutchinson Guest and Claudia Jeschke deciphered his system and translated it into the more commonly used Labanotation, and the dance has been taught and filmed from this score.[18] Comparing

[14] *Diary*, p. xliv.

[15] Lincoln Kirstein, *Dance: A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing* (New York: 1935, reprinted 1969), p. 283.

[16] Lincoln Kirstein, *Movement & Metaphor: Four Centuries of Ballet* (New York, 1970).

[17] *Diary*, p. xlv.

[18] *Choreography and Dance*, Vol. 1 Part 3 (1991) contains several accounts of the research

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this production with the more widely known word-of-mouth stagings of the *Faune* (evidently after Rudolf Nureyev's performances) in the recent repertories of the Joffrey and the Paris Opera Ballets, you can see quite obvious differences. We don't even know which is Acocella's definitive and defining version.

And to claim that only "meager evidence" prompted Millicent Hodson's eight-year reinstatement of *Le Sacre du Printemps* is an insult to one of the most scrupulous and dedicated scholars in the field of dance history. I wonder if Acocella looked at Hodson's choreographic documentation,[19] compiled in the 1980s from musical scores annotated by Igor Stravinsky and Marie Rambert (Nijinsky's closest associate on the choreography), as well as artists' sketchbooks, interviews with surviving dancers, and every eyewitness account she could collect. Hodson tested the movements, rhythms, and floor patterns she derived from all this on dancers to see how they would have worked. At last Robert Joffrey gave her the means to complete the job, with Nicholas Roerich's scenic and costume designs researched and replicated by the art historian Kenneth Archer.

Hodson's *Sacre* reveals her own directorial and creative talent. She not only had to transfer the research to the stage, but give a credible account of every inch of the 40-dancer, 45-minute masterpiece. Her *Sacre* was a tremendous success when the Joffrey premiered it in 1987, and has since been taken into the repertory of several ballet companies around the world. Hodson and Archer went on to retrieve many other iconic twentieth-century ballets, including *Jeux* and *Tyl*, and to create new works from styles long thought to have disappeared. Since Acocella ignores it, we don't know why she thinks Hodson's *Sacre* is inauthentic, nor, for that matter, why the original *Sacre* or anything else validates Nijinsky's choreographic greatness.

Unless some miraculous discovery is made—a film taken during a performance by some phantom photographer at the back of a theater—we can only know Nijinsky's choreography and his dancing by secondhand means. I think dance history from the point when the artist ceases to function has to be debatable. People will find documents, they'll search their memories, they'll try to match up visual relics with verbal accounts, and they'll disagree about what that all means. But I think the argument is preferable to Acocella's brand of critical sophistry. She offers nothing but a *Faune* reconstruction with an unidentified provenance to prove Nijinsky's crucial position as the founder of modernism. So we're left with this deeply disturbed diary as his artistic testament. As a vehicle of mystification, it encourages those who'd like

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and translation of this score. In the video *Nijinsky's* Faune *Restored* (Gordon and Breach, 1991), the dance was filmed in performance by dancers at the Juilliard School.

[19] Millicent Hodson, *Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace* (Stuyvesant, N.Y., 1996).

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BROOKE ALLEN

Matisse Revealed

WE LIVE IN AN AGE WHEN SELF-EXPRESSION or what is loosely referred to as "creativity" is held in very high regard even by those who possess no particular creative bent themselves. Even the most unremittingly bourgeois and materialistic parents enroll their children in art or dance programs from the time they are toddlers; public schools attract middle-class parents by placing their children in "gifted and talented" programs; canny toy manufacturers market their goods under names like "Creativity for Children." The attitude seems to be that, given enough freedom, children will become creative—or rather, will develop the creative tendencies that must surely exist in every child—in a natural and inevitable fashion.

Why, then, is the current art scene so dull? Why have recent decades failed to produce an international genius on the level of, say, Henri Matisse? Given every freedom in the world, why do American and European artists seem to have so very little to express?

The lesson seems to be that while no doubt it is possible with a lot of effort to stifle an artistic gift in a child, it is not correspondingly possible to inspire one where none exists; also that a familial or cultural hostility to artistic innovation is not necessarily an impediment to talent, as the history of the French avant-garde over the last hundred fifty years has decisively proved. In the superb first volume of her new, definitive biography of Matisse, British critic and biographer Hilary Spurling has given us a marvelously revealing life of one of the world's most egregious examples of the genius who flourishes in apparently adverse conditions.[1]

Spurling's purpose seems to have been to provide as rich and detailed a background for the man whom posterity has deemed the century's Number Two painter as John Richardson has for its Number One, Picasso. And Matisse, discreet, private, infinitely less flamboyant than Picasso, is more in need of such treatment. The popular image of Matisse, which was to a large degree developed and propagated by Picasso, Gertrude Stein and their *claque*, is of a repressive fuddy-duddy ("*le grand bourgeois cossu*," in Stein's words, or, as she sometimes cynically referred to him behind his back, "*Cher Maître*"). Spurling, who has dug far deeper into Matisse's early life than any other writer, proves that so

[1] THE UNKNOWN MATISSE: A Life of Henri Matisse: The Early Years, 1869–1908, by *Hilary Spurling*. Alfred A. Knopf. $40.00.

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far from being natural to him "the iron discipline, neatness and punctuality of his later years were deliberately imposed to contain a nature of extreme and innate unruliness," and that the remarkable discretion of the entire Matisse family was a trait that unhappy circumstances, rather than character, dictated.

Looking back on Matisse nearly fifty years after his death, he strikes us now as the century's preeminent painter of light, luxury, and warmth. We associate him with glorious Southern seascapes, with alluring odalisques, with brightly-hued birds, fish, and fabrics. It comes as something of a shock, then, to realize that that artist's origins were as far removed from such scenes as it is possible to be. As Spurling puts it, "On one level, his whole life may be construed as a flight towards the brilliant light, the singing colours and apparently effortless freedom of his painting."

The contrast between the world of his painting and the physical environment of his early life is stark. "He spent his first twenty-one years," Spurling points out, "—a quarter of his life—in [a] treeless industrial landscape under dour northern skies, showing no apparent interest in painting and envisioning little or no possibility of escape from a future as a wholesale seed-merchant, like his father."

Hippolyte Henri Matisse and his wife Anna, the parents of Henri Matisse, were characteristic of their generation: ambitious young people who took advantage of opportunities created by the new industrial society to pull themselves by their bootstraps out of the laboring classes and into the emerging provincial bourgeoisie. Hippolyte Henri, from a family of weavers in French Flanders, went to work as a shop boy in Paris; by the time of his marriage, he was a trainee buyer in ladies' underwear. His son Henri was born on December 31, 1869 in his parents' hometown of Le Cateau-Cambrésis, and when the child was eight days old they moved to the nearby village of Bohain, where they took over a general store that they developed, over the years, into a seed business.

At that time Bohain and the surrounding towns and countryside were undergoing the swift and traumatic industrialization process that has been so memorably recorded in the novels of Zola. Bohain specialized in textiles and sugar beets, and its ethos was sternly utilitarian. "Where I come from," Matisse would say later, "if there is a tree in the way, they root it out because it puts four beets in the shade." The grim atmosphere of the place was intensified by the humiliation and sense of failure that continued throughout Matisse's childhood as a result of the German occupation of the region during the Franco-Prussian War, when the artist was a year old.

To families like the Matisses, the memory of grinding poverty was too recent ever to allow them to take their hard-won prosperity for granted. At any moment they might slide back down the slippery slope. There was no question, then, of an artistic career being considered; everyone must contribute to the vital work of keeping the family afloat. Aside from which, in Matisse's milieu, as in the north of France generally, "artists

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ranked along with Freemasons, Protestants, Jews, and radicals of all sorts as social misfits." Even if some child had dreamed of escape, there was little if anything to nourish a nascent artistic imagination, for "Bohain had no museum, no local big house or art gallery, no paintings to speak of in its town hall or church."

At the age of twelve Matisse enrolled at the Lycée Henri Martin in the nearby town of St. Quentin, an old-fashioned school where reading was censored and the curriculum firmly centered on Latin and Greek grammar. "The immense intellectual world outside did not exist for us," said Gabriel Hanoteaux, a historian who was a countryman and contemporary of Matisse. There were art classes, but they consisted only of meaningless mechanical exercises and Matisse hated them. He left school at the age of seventeen, with no real idea of what to do next. "I realized that I had a certain facility in drawing without having the least notion of going on with it."

Matisse had not proved academically gifted, and a tendency to nervous stomach ailments made him too weak to move into the seed business, which depended on the ability to haul heavy sacks. His parents, without much hope for his success, decided that he was to become a law clerk. They sent him to Paris for a year, where he attended the law matriculation class at the Sorbonne, an undemanding course of study in which he nevertheless contrived to do badly: the law "was Hebrew to me," he commented later. He seems to have had little energy or curiosity at that point, never even setting foot in the Louvre during his year in the metropolis.

Back in St. Quentin, Matisse languished in a career he found both dull and incomprehensible, relieving his feelings of oppression by pelting unsuspecting passersby with a pea-shooter. It was, as in the case of his English contemporary H.G. Wells, another *petit bourgeois* of narrow horizons, a fortuitous illness which caused him to mark time and, in the process, to reshape his life. With Matisse it was a collapse after months of gastric problems, and it landed him in the hospital. The young man in the next bed, Léon Bouvier, was happily engaged in copying a Swiss landscape in oils from a colored reproduction. There was no better relaxation, Bouvier assured him, than sitting down comfortably to paint. Matisse, propped up in the hospital bed, gave it a try—and found, at last, his life's purpose.

> Before I had no interest in anything. I felt a great indifference to everything they tried to make me do. From the moment I held the box of colours in my hand, I knew this was my life. Like an animal that plunges headlong toward what it loves, I dived in, to the understandable despair of my father. . . . It was a tremendous attraction, a sort of Paradise Found in which I was completely free, alone, at peace. . . .

Matisse was twenty years old, and painfully aware of the lost time behind him. He began a feverish programme of self-education as well as

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enrolling in evening classes at the Ecole Gratuite de Dessin Quentin de la Tour, a provincial feeder for the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, a bastion of academic art and keeper of the "sacred flame of classicism." It was conservative even by the standards of the academic art establishment of the time: students copied engravings and statuary, not actual subjects; live human models were unknown; only the most advanced were permitted to draw from nature. The use of color was forbidden except for the very top class, a ban that stayed in effect, incredibly, until World War II. One rebellious young teacher, Emmanuel Croizé, eventually started his own more adventurous classes, and Matisse attended these as well as the standard course at the Ecole.

In 1891 he left Flanders more or less definitively for Paris, after a wrenching struggle with his father. "It would be hard to exaggerate the shock of Matisse's defection," Spurling writes, "in a community which dismissed any form of art as an irrelevant, probably seditious and essentially contemptible occupation indulged in by layabouts." M. Matisse loved his son and gave him, at least intermittently, what small financial help he could afford; but it was impossible for him to believe he would be anything but a failure, as indeed he was considered for decades to come by nearly everyone in his hometown.

Centralized since the days of Colbert, the competitive, hierarchical system officially imposed upon the production of art was "a philosophical approach as much as an administrative convenience in France." Anyone who hoped for a successful artistic career had literally no choice but to enter the dictatorial, conservative Ecole des Beaux Arts. At the time of Matisse's arrival in Paris the most influential figure there was William Bouguereau, "the pope of the French art world," who as President of the Société des Artistes Françaises controlled access to the official Salon (from which he had succeeded in blocking Cézanne for twenty years) and, with it, to sales and commissions. Matisse enrolled in his class, but the academic principle of "enhancement," the standard procedure of idealizing and regularizing subjects in the classical tradition of which Bouguereau was a master, repelled the young man. "I couldn't see any reason to paint that way. On top of which I hadn't the faintest notion how to set about doing it."

It was not until Matisse entered Gustave Moreau's class that he began to feel solid ground beneath his feet and a certain freedom to develop in his own direction. Moreau, while belonging to the moribund academic tradition, was open to innovation and did not discourage it in his young protégés, who included Georges Rouault as well as Matisse and Matisse's bosom friends Albert Marquet, Henri Manguin, and Simon Bussy. "The last six and a half years of his life," writes Spurling, "the period when he taught at the Beaux-Arts, saw an extraordinary opening out and unfolding in Moreau. He embarked with his pupils on a learning curve in these years during which he became acutely conscious of straddling the gap between the art of the past and the future."

Not that the education Moreau imparted was exactly radical. His

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students' attention was not directed toward the revolutionaries of the present—indeed, they seemed hardly aware of Gauguin, Seurat and Cézanne—but focused, instead, upon the great works of the past, and it was through the old masters rather than the new that Matisse began to understand the possibilities of art. "I believed I would never be able to paint because I didn't paint like the others," he said of his early days at the Beaux-Arts. "Then I saw the Goyas at Lille. That was when I understood that painting could be a language; I thought that I could become a painter." In the Louvre, where Moreau often took his students, the works of Chardin were to provide the same inspiration.

In 1892 Matisse had met an attractive young shop girl, Caroline (always called Camille) Joblaud, and the two set up house together not long afterward in the sort of unofficial arrangement not uncommon among the bohemian students of Matisse's circle. In 1894 a daughter was born: Marguerite Emilienne Matisse, a girl of unusual strength of character who was to have the greatest importance in her father's life and career. For the moment, though, the social taboos of the era made it impossible for the elder Matisses to acknowledge their granddaughter or for Camille to visit Bohain with her.

Matisse now began to have a few intimations of possible success to come. He finally passed the Beaux-Arts entrance exam (on the third try) in 1895; he was singled out for special praise by the art critic of the *Journal de St-Quentin*—"the first and almost the last public recognition Matisse received in his lifetime from his native region," Spurling comments dryly. He was elected an associate member of the Société Nationale, under the wing of Puvis de Chavannes. But success for its own sake was never to be enough for Matisse and now, in what would be the beginning of a career-long pattern, he would reject it in an almost ferocious fashion.

The man who inspired him to do so was John Peter Russell, the second of Matisse's mentors. Russell, a forceful, charismatic Australian artist, was the presiding genius of Belle-Ile-en-Mer, an island off the coast of Brittany where Matisse spent the summers of 1895–1897. A fine painter and inspirational talker, Russell introduced his friend to the theories of Impressionism, and particularly to the work of Monet. "However outmoded these sessions might have seemed to more fashion-conscious practitioners in Paris, they came as a shock to Moreau's students," Spurling points out. During the summer of 1896 Matisse's style loosened dramatically in both tone and texture, to the point where a break with the establishment, and even with Moreau, was inevitable. The most disturbing canvas he brought back was *The Dinner Table (La Desserte)*, originally intended as a variation on de Heem's *Dessert* in the Louvre, now evolved out of all recognition. "Everyone who saw his painting in his studio that winter must have realized that it meant the end of any serious hope of sales or promotion."

The canvas, hung at the Salon de la Nationale on 24 April 1897, scandalized the art world and even Matisse's close friends. It also

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precipitated the breakup of his menage, for Camille could not countenance what she saw as his throwing away his career. She pleaded, wept, and protested in vain; they parted during the summer of 1897, a period that marked a decisive break in both Matisse's life and his work. The seascapes he produced in Brittany that summer caused an uproar, and with them he rejected firmly and without a backward glance all overtures made to him by the official art world.

It was also in 1897 that he met his future wife, Amélie Parayre; he married her only three months later, in January of 1898. Spurling rightly represents Amélie as the heroine of Matisse's life: her absolute faith in his gift, her unquestioning acceptance of his every professional decision, her boundless energy and strength of mind, her easy willingness to forego unnecessary comforts, and her professional skills as a hatmaker and stylist enabled the painter to forget domestic concerns and concentrate entirely on his work. It might even be hazarded that his choice of a wife was the most fortunate and far-reaching decision of Matisse's life.

Amélie Parayre was from Toulouse, and belonged to a family of well-known left-wing intellectuals. M. Parayre had been an influential journalist, and at the time of the marriage he and his wife were the supporters and closest associates of Frédéric and Thérèse Humbert, perhaps the most prominent political couple in France. The Parayres were more than a cut above the Matisses, and the marriage went down well in Bohain; more importantly, they were freethinking idealists who supported their unpromising son-in-law as absolutely as their daughter did.

It cannot be said that Matisse's fortunes took a turn for the better; but his life did, and so did the quality of his work. The change began on the honeymoon itself, when the young couple went to London to see the Turners (an almost obligatory visit for French avant-garde painters at the time) and then continued on to Corsica, which was a revelation to Matisse. He had gone there simply to get away, to make a clean break—"*Et qu'est-ce que j'ai découvert!*" he said later. The light, the color, the people, all so vivid and so very different from the grey and muted landscapes of his youth: "For him it was the Orient," as a friend said.

The paintings reflect his ardor. They are, Spurling says, "the work of a man emerging from a cellar. . . . He painted light, warmth, colour itself." He would later trace Fauvism itself back to that initial shock of Corsica. The work was not Fauve yet, but it was more than disturbing enough to Matisse's friends back in Paris. His close friend and ally Evenepoel took a week to recover and write Matisse his thoughts: the canvas looked, Evenepoel wrote, as though it had been painted "by a mad and epileptic Impressionist!"

In 1899, Matisse's thirtieth year, his son Jean was born. "The period of studying was over," he said. "It was time to earn a living." The Beaux-Arts was no longer a safe haven. When Matisse showed one of his Corsican canvases to Fernand Cormon, who had taken over Moreau's studio after the latter's death, Cormon couldn't even bring himself to speak to the

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painter directly. "Is he over thirty?" he asked the student in charge of the studio. (Thirty was the Beaux-Arts age limit.) "Yes." "Does he know what he's doing?" "Yes." "Then he'll have to go." As Matisse commented, "They were afraid the thing was catching."

Selling nothing and finding no work, Matisse and Marquet were reduced to hiring themselves out as laborers, while Amélie opened a small hat shop. The family was growing: four-year-old Marguerite left her mother and became part of the household in 1899, and a year later Pierre was born. Even in their worst financial straits, though, the Matisses knew their priorities: they pawned Amélie's prize possession, an emerald ring, to raise 500 francs to acquire Cézanne's *Three Bathers* from Vollard. It was a purchase they never regretted. "In the thirty-seven years I have owned this painting, I have come to know it fairly well, though I hope not entirely," Matisse wrote when in 1937 he presented the work, at his wife's suggestion, to the City of Paris. "It has supported me morally at critical moments in my venture as an artist; I have drawn from it my faith and my perseverance."

Matisse joined the classes of Eugène Carrière, one of the foremost painters in France at that time. His work puzzled Carrière and most of the others in the studio, but he made at least one important friend there: the eighteen-year-old André Derain, quiet and reserved but artistically explosive. (His canvases were so disturbing to the public in the Louvre that some demanded his expulsion from the galleries for an "*attentat à la beauté,*" an outrage against beauty. Derain in turn was to introduce him to the equally iconoclastic Maurice Vlaminck.

Carrière, like others before him, eventually sent Matisse packing. He found a more sympathetic spirit, though, in his next teacher, Antoine Bourdelle, although in 1902 he discovered a champion and a gallery in the maverick dealer Berthe Weill, whose third show, opening in February of that year, included works by Matisse and Marquet. She sold two of Matisse's paintings: "his first professional sales . . . since he had given up trying to please anyone but himself five years before."

It was at this hopeful point that disaster struck. Art historians have often been puzzled by what they have come to call Matisse's "dark period," the time between 1902 and late 1903 when he seemed to repudiate his innovations and retreat into a dull, conservative style. Spurling, in a painstaking and inspired piece of detective work, has discovered the reason for this apparent failure of artistic nerve: the explosive news that Thérèse Humbert had for twenty years been perpetrating a legal and financial scam on a truly monumental scale. The authorities closed in, but the Humberts had flown the coop, leaving 11,000 small investors bilked of their life savings. The Parayres were arrested; Matisse's studio and Amélie's hat shop were raided. It was generally acknowledged that the Parayres were innocent dupes, but M. Parayre was imprisoned for a time in the Conciergerie. The once-prosperous elderly couple was now penniless, and widely reviled.

Matisse now found himself practically the sole support of a large

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family, and for the first time in years he felt constrained to tailor his work to the popular taste, returning to the muted palettes he had abandoned several years before and even going so far as to attempt formal academic subjects. He and his family took momentary refuge in Bohain, where he was considered a lamentable failure (and would be thought so for the rest of his life: the locals referred to him as "le sot Matisse," a fool or clown, and even his own cousins banished his paintings to the attic).

The spring of 1903, as Spurling demonstrates, marked his low point. In July of that year he took a house above the river Oise in the village of Lesquielles St-Germain, where he lived on an income about equal to that of a laborer, began to paint the sort of calm, domestic scene for which he would later become so well known, and tried, with a singular lack of success, to create a market for his work by organizing syndicates of private patrons. And sometime during the winter he met Paul Signac, yet another important older mentor.

Signac was vice-president of the Société des Artistes Indépendants, the only salon to have abolished the hierarchical and competitive system: Matisse exhibited six pictures there in 1904 and sold two, one for the undreamed-of price of 400 francs.

> I placed a one-hundred-franc bill on the floor. I stepped back one metre. I put down the second bill. Another metre. I put down the third. And then, one metre further back, the fourth. And Charles Guérin touched the bills with his foot, before asking me uneasily: "Have you killed someone?"

Signac was a passionate advocate of Divisionism, or Neo-Impressionism, and invited Matisse to St-Tropez where he tried to convert the younger man to the ranks of the Neo-Impressionists. Matisse would grapple with Neo-Impressionism as he had, some years earlier, with Impressionism, then—again as he had with Impressionism—internalize its lessons and leave it behind. The most important painting of his brief Divisionist period is the famous *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*; when he severed himself from the group to which he had never very seriously belonged, Signac recognized the defection of this most gifted of its adherents as marking the effective end of the movement.

As Matisse turned away from the technical constraints of Divisionism, it was to van Gogh and Gauguin that he looked for inspiration, and, again, in the South that he pursued it. In 1905 the Matisses repaired to Collioure, an isolated village on the point of the Catalan coast where France comes closest to North Africa. The town "made few concessions to the modern world. Women still dressed entirely in black, men in faded blue sailcloth." Collioure gave Matisse access to the primitive world on which he would draw over the next decade; it also gave him solitude and freedom from the opinions and artistic constraints of Paris.

The three-and-a-half months of 1905 he spent in Collioure, the "Fauve

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summer," "developed into an ordeal on which he looked back afterwards with horror and amazement." He couldn't sleep, began to feel that he was literally cracking up as his work loosed itself more insistently from naturalistic restrictions. Feeling the need of another painter with whom to share his feelings, he pressed Derain to join him there. The two men worked furiously together, delirious as they smashed taboos and standards that had been in effect since the Renaissance. "The work to be done is fearful," Derain wrote to Vlaminck. "Everything I've done up till now strikes me as stupid." Years later Matisse recalled the time as an ordeal by fire, with himself and Derain in thrall to an almost demonic possession.

Among the canvases Matisse brought back from Collioure was *The Green Line*, the famous portrait of Mme. Matisse that shocked their contemporaries, now considered one of his greatest masterpieces, and a second portrait of the same sitter, *Woman in a Hat*, which Matisse exhibited that year in the Salon d'Automne. Parisians, by now in the habit of touring the Salons as they would a freak show, greeted *Woman in a Hat* with shrieks of derisive laughter. It was not the first time Matisse had provoked this response, nor would it be the last.

A week before the Salon closed a telegram arrived with an offer to purchase *Woman in a Hat* for three hundred francs, two hundred less than the asking price. Money was extremely tight, and Matisse wanted to accept, but Amélie insisted that they hold out for the full amount: the difference would make winter clothes for Marguerite. Miraculously, a second telegram arrived, agreeing to the terms. The buyers were Americans: a brother and sister, Leo and Gertrude Stein.

The patronage of Leo Stein, and, later and more importantly, that of his sister-in-law Sarah Stein ("the one who had the instinct in that group," Matisse said), marked the end for him of real, frightening penury. Matisse did not become popular overnight—the reaction to his *Bonheur de Vivre* at the Salon des Indépendants in 1906 was as derisive as the earlier one to *Woman in a Hat*—but the tide had finally turned. In 1906 collectors began actually to compete for his work. In 1908 he had shows in London, New York, and Moscow, where startled Russian art lovers reacted to the work, as one observer remarked, "like Eskimos to a gramophone." *Le Bonheur de Vivre* brought him to the attention of the Russian industrialist Sergei Ivanovich Shchukin, who along with Sarah Stein would be his most important patron and would commission, among others, the great *Harmony in Red* (he had asked for a *Harmony in Blue*, but happily accepted the repainted final product).

Spurling ends this first volume in 1908, with Matisse, nearing forty, finally poised at the apex of the Parisian avant-garde alongside the man who was to be his lifelong arch-rival, Pablo Picasso. Their rivalry, what Spurling calls a "lifelong dialogue on canvas," was just beginning. The happy period of Matisse's marriage, however, was drawing to a close, a fact Spurling does not hint at in this volume: middle age would see the couple drift into a more or less permanent separation.

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Now, ninety years on, with Matisse prints and posters hung in every bourgeois home and Matisse exhibits packed with society matrons, it is hard to conceive how shocking his work once was to middlebrow and even highbrow sensibilities—how successful, in other words, has been the aesthetic revolution he brought about. It is almost impossible for us to put ourselves back into the visual climate of a century ago, when the works of William Bouguereau looked beautiful rather than kitschy, and Matisse's early and to our eyes quite cautious still lifes and landscapes seemed harbingers of riot and revolution. It is Hilary Spurling's magnificent achievement to have re-created that vanished world, and at the same time to have given a discerning and immensely sympathetic portrait of a complicated man whose character, single-minded to the point of selfishness, has too often been undervalued.

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ALAN DAVIS

Fiction Chronicle

I HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT SOME COMMENTS made by A. S. Byatt in a recent Web-only essay on the *New York Times* entitled "Of the Making of Many Lists." In the essay, she writes about her part in the selection process of the Modern Library's Top 100 Nonfiction Books of the Century. "What I tried to vote for," she writes, "was first, those books that had made a significant shift in my mental landscape, had changed the way I saw the world, and second, books whose writing was an aesthetic delight." In the former category, she includes books like Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* ("the essential text" about women) and James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; while Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (which "enlarged my sense of what language could do"), epitomizes the latter. (It is unfathomable to me, by the way, that the *Principia Mathematica*, an unreadable book if ever there was one, also made the list.)

"With lists," Byatt writes, "we arrange both the past and the future in our minds." An inveterate list-maker myself, I rather like that. In fact, one of my projects over the past several months has been to give away books by the bagload—to students, friends, colleagues—as I try to wean what feels inessential from my life in the wake of my mother's recent death. For me, Byatt distinguishes usefully between canons, personal canons and syllabi—if more of us made such distinctions, there would perhaps (then again, perhaps not) be fewer tedious squabbles concerning the worth of a particular book. And there would certainly be fewer books on our shelves—some of the books that remain here with me are teaching books, some books I love, others classics that I need more than love.

Byatt's own latest collection is aesthetically charming, and to my taste would be placed in the Nabokovian camp.[1] The best of these six "stories of fire and ice" find their language exactly and also avoid frigidity, so that we are both pleased by the artifice and moved by the situation of someone finding her way back to life. In "Crocodile Tears," a woman, Patricia Nimmo, unable to face the accidental death of her husband ("Large, kind Tony, through whom Shakespeare's lines spoke strong and clear, and to her"), vacates to France, where she reads Proust, remembers her dead husband, and finds a way to grieve with the help of Nils, a man who returns with her to London. Whereas in the new *Star Wars* movie, apothegms are put into the mouths of cardboard charac-

[1] ELEMENTALS, by *A.S. Byatt.* Random House. $21.95.

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ters, in Byatt's stories she weaves history and myth into the narrative with an astonishing subtlety: so that when Patricia takes out an eyebrow pencil and writes graffito on Tony's grave ("THE ODDS IS GONE / AND THERE IS NOTHING LEFT REMARKABLE / BENEATH THE VISITING MOON"), we participate in her breakthrough, her decision to live through grief rather than to evade it. Another story, "A Lamia in the Cevennes," is a witty disquisition about a painter who moves to the south of France and installs a swimming pool so that he can spend his days swimming and painting. Soon enough, a snake appears in the pool, an enchanted black water snake that is actually a woman in disguise, who needs a kiss to achieve her true form. Like any cold-blooded painter, this one refuses because he wants to keep the snake a snake so that he can study its coloring. After much wordplay, painter and snake come to a mutually agreeable resolution that seems exactly right for the fable: he manages almost magically to give away the woman to a friend, because "He didn't want a woman. He wanted another visual idea."

Her book is certainly not canonical, nor does it finally come to rest on my personal list of favorites, but its small format, replete with lovely black-and-white replications of a painting or object of art at the beginning of each story, is easy to hold in the hand, and its mixture of realism, fable and fairy tale makes for a satisfying evening of fiction. By contrast, *Dragon Hunt*, a collection of stories by Tran Vu, a Vietnamese writer who has lived as a refugee in France since 1979, is also printed in small format, which I like, but I find it more difficult to categorize.[2] I think Byatt's two categories are myopic: she leaves out the world, what might be called the literature of witness or the documentary function of fiction. Though Vu's book has its aesthetic pleasures, it also tells me a great deal about the life of the boat people. The best story is "The Coral Reef," an autobiographical account in journal form of fleeing in a rickety boat from Vietnam with hundreds of refugees. "So, this is our last night of socialism," one of the characters says before the journey, and the appetite for freedom helps most of the seasick escapees survive a harrowing journey to the Philippines that is interrupted, most notably, by a kind of Sargasso Sea experience on a coral reef. The nightmarish account reaches its realistic absurdity when several of the men build a makeshift raft to seek rescue but find themselves carried back by a storm to the ship, which doesn't work itself free until a big tide arrives.

If Tran Vu writes of refugees who find their way back from political and social constraints to life, and Byatt's stories are more concerned with psychological regeneration, Alan Warner's third book, *The Sopranos*, is comic farce with an edge.[3] Warner is one of several Scottish writers—Irving Welsh, of *Trainspotting* fame, is another—who have received a good deal of literary attention of late; his first novel, *Morvern*

[2] THE DRAGON HUNT, by *Tran Vu*. Trans. by *Nina McPherson* and *Phan Huy Duong*. Hyperion East. $21.00.

[3] THE SOPRANOS, by *Alan Warner*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $24.00.

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Callar, won a Somerset Maugham Award, and any number of notable writers write him extravagant blurbs on his dust jacket and in the publicity material that accompanies my copy of the book. In *The Sopranos*, the choir from Our Lady of Perpetual Succour School for Girls travels from their small coastal town to London to compete in the St. Columbia Choir's final. In London, they do the usual things that wayward Catholics on holiday do—go shopping, drink spiked soda, wear miniskirts and makeup, think about or have sex—but they do it with attitude and cynicism. If the adults in attendance are cartoon figures, too stereotypical for my taste, the girls are delightful, largely because Warner has an ear for dialogue and a taste for pop culture of the sort that this group lusts after. One of the girls, Kylah, is in a band with three guys whose best-known song is "Homage to Catatonia"; and Kylah had "been in EACH of their bedrooms in the afternoons, checking out the differences in their penises." Higher aspirations get mostly lost in the Day-Glo shuffle of boutiques and dives, but the girls look out for one another, more or less, and learn a few lessons along the way. In the hands of a lesser writer, or one less sympathetic, the tale would be vulgar in the way of Hollywood, but Warner delights in the sense of freedom that soon enough melts away for the girls, who after all must return to their corner of the world, one where visits to a disco appropriately called Mantrap are the highlight of their social lives.

Warner will probably make few Top 100 lists when they proliferate with the turn of the millennium, but his book—a demotic delight about a different sort of refugee than the ones Tran Vu describes, the ones forced from their country of origin into uncharted waters—is still an aesthetic delight that updates my sense of his part of the world, even if it doesn't change my mental landscape. (So few books do.) Jeanette Winterson's latest collection of stories, on the other hand, though many of its pieces are slight, is the latest from a writer who has achieved almost cult-like status with some readers.[4] The book is good enough to make me want to read her oeuvre. She is flighty, flirty, zany and immensely lyrical in this uneven collection. If I read Byatt because other people do, she is seldom a guilty pleasure, whereas Winterson delights me despite my occasional irritation. "The 24-Hour Dog," for example, is a slight piece, I felt as I read it, but the end dazzled me. It's basically a story of luminous fragments that delivers what the title promises, a story of a dog that she owned temporarily: "He was as soft as rainwater." "He's only a dog. Yes but he will find me out." Finally, the dog's real owners reclaim him: "The strange thing is that although I have given him away, I can't lose him, and he can't die." In the touching, aching title story, a boy flies model airplanes in his living room, and the family, impoverished, makes up tales about faraway places. As an adult, he travels for real, but the stories he brings home to his family lack luster: "Bombay. Cairo. Paris.

[4] THE WORLD AND OTHER PLACES, by *Jeanette Winterson*. Alfred A. Knopf. $22.00.

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New York. We have invented them so many times that to tell the truth will be a disappointment." Her love stories too manage to be achingly familiar and lyrically tender in a fashion that never sounded sentimental to me: "She was a clue I tried to follow but I live in a world that has lost the plot."

She's compulsively readable, that is, and belongs already, even before I've launched into her better-known books like *Sexing the Cherry* and *Written on the Body*, on my personal canon, and (I suspect) might appear on one of my syllabi sometime soon. As for the larger canon, the one about which we mostly agree to disagree (except when we agree to agree if we're talking lit with fellow travelers), I'll reserve judgment for now: none of the books I read this go-round qualify, in my opinion, for that kind of lofty company.

Alyce Miller's *Stopping for Green Lights* is interesting in the way that Warner is interesting, because she tells me something new about a particular place in the country of the young.[5] It's a chronicle set in a college town near Cleveland in the late sixties about a girl, Tish Espy, fifteen, who is white but wants to be black. Miller, who has published one previous book, *The Nature of Longing*, which won the Flannery O'Connor Award from The University of Georgia Press, is all foreplay and texture. This is a lived-in novel that slyly dramatizes how white teen culture of that time period had no real personality but co-opted what it could. "Years of affinity, social standing, and advanced classes held them [the white in-crowd] together like glue. Semester after semester Tish had watched them like a foreign movie without subtitles." Tish comes to identify with black power, challenge the assumptions of her liberal parents, and otherwise engage in the sort of identity-switching that makes for imaginative inflation whose conclusion is almost always some sort of collapse. Here, she falls for Goody, a nineteen-year-old black man-boy, and his eventual betrayal, predictable enough to any experienced adult, leaves her stranded, though not on a coral reef with her life in danger. Instead, it's simply travail of adolescence, and Miller sees her through it to a hopeful future.

When I started reading the book, I thought that the irony of her delusion was too easy, or too cute, but Miller is a savvy writer who stays out of the reach of sentimentality and evokes a time and place with sure-handed realism. It's one of those novels, though, that will sadly sink from view, not strong enough for the canon, not dazzling enough for me to pass on to friends as a personal favorite, and not likely to make an appearance on many syllabi in years to come, unless the syllabus is for a sociology class or a seminar on revisioning the sixties. So many books, such a short shelf life—what an equation, huh? Can anything be pettier than having to say such things? As a child of the sixties myself, I can almost see why attempts to agree on a canon degenerate so often into

[5] STOPPING FOR GREEN LIGHTS, by *Alyce Miller*. Doubleday. $23.95.

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shouting matches, but the attempt to place ourselves in history, "to arrange both the past and the future in our minds," as Byatt puts it, can't be avoided for too long or we'll find ourselves analyzing the backs of cereal boxes instead of reading books.

Which brings me to the last of my titles, Ellen Douglas' *Truth*, a memoir of sorts instead of a fiction.[6] "Ellen Douglas" is the pen name of a Mississippi woman, Josephine Haxton, who wrote her first novel almost forty years ago about two of her maiden aunts and refused to publish the book without their permission. They gave it, but only on condition that Haxton find a pseudonym. Since then, she has published seven books of fiction: in 1973, *Apostles of Light* was a National Book Award finalist. In this book, she aims to set the record straight about her family and about the South: "I know that I put words in the mouths of people who did not speak them. I imagine scenes at which I was not present." Her mission here is nothing less than to try to discern how we tell the truth. "It's about the truth in fiction and the fiction in truth."

Of course, she finds no final answers; we wouldn't trust her if she did. Instead, she tells four stories: "Grant," about her husband's uncle, eighty-two years old, who comes to her house to die of cancer and is nursed through his final days by a beautiful black woman, illiterate Rosalie, who studies the Bible with him and becomes his almost-intimate companion. (He wants her to touch him, she tells Douglas, but she is unable to oblige him, and Douglas includes the detail precisely because it complicates and deepens the portrait of Grant.) In "Julie and Nellie," close cousins maintain a scandalous lifelong connection despite the family's Presbyterianism and strict morality, and thereby humanize rather than compromise the Southern social code. In "Hampton," the black gardener, handyman and butler named in the title, is Douglas' grandmother's servant for two decades but refuses to reveal himself to her or to anyone else. Finally, "On Second Creek" examines the family's part in the hanging of some thirty slaves in 1861 after a kangaroo trial in which they were accused, with apparently little evidence, of plotting an uprising. Douglas uses as her source material a first-hand report written at the time by a cousin, and juxtaposes the story to her grandfather's suicide.

The book is rich in incident and in ambiguity: "I have been debating how to make it clear, to put you on notice, so to speak, that every single detail of my story is not true." The book is as involved in epistemology as in tale-telling, and in fact the nature of fiction is always an epistemological endeavor, Douglas wants us to know, and we are forever raveling and unraveling the past and future. Like Tim O'Brien's realistic fables about Vietnam, or like Walker Percy's novels, the ambiguity of the search for truth is the real story. "Maybe there are so many things going

[6] TRUTH, by *Ellen Douglas*. Algonquin Books. $18.95.

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on in every life that it's not possible to do more than set down what one knows and let it go at that," Douglas writes.

On the basis of the clarity of her prose and the attempt to turn the devices of fiction to nonfiction ends, I have already decided to include this book on my syllabus this fall when I teach an MFA workshop in literary journalism. She's not going to appear on my personal canon or in the environs of Mount Olympus where I'm told certain great ones still converse through the ages because they're a part of the canon that Moses found graven in stone, but she's good company. So is Eudora Welty, to name another Mississippi writer of greater renown, who I think belongs on all three lists, and maybe a few others besides. I would love to spend an evening or so chatting with and listening to Eudora Welty when I travel this summer to Mississippi and Louisiana, to visit her as I once stopped in Covington to see Walker Percy, who was also good company, though of a different sort than I hear tell Miss Welty is.

This project of reading books and then reporting on them seems almost quaint sometimes. Or maybe it's just that my mother died this past February and I came to that loss of meaning that can accompany grief. Not thinking at times can be beneficial, I think, and that includes reading for pleasure. With the exception of Winterson's wonderful and odd collection, yet another book of small format that fits easily in the hands, I can't say that my foremost sensation as I made my way through this particular batch had to do with pleasure, but neither did it have much to do with the making of lists or canons. We read, and as we do, we stop to think or feel, and then we read again, and after what feels like a lifetime of such reading, we begin to make our own lists, ones we can devise ourselves rather than take from others on their advice. And, once devised, we revise, make over and throw away, until we're left with a handful of books that we cannot live without.

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MARK JARMAN

Dark Night of the Brilliant Talker

> O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been
> Alone on a wide wide sea:
> So lonely 'twas, that God himself
> Scarce seeméd there to be.

A SENSE OF APPREHENSION ATTENDS THE LAST THIRTY YEARS of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's life, now documented in the second volume of Richard Holmes's sad, depressing, but ultimately moving account.[1] It is clear by the end of the first volume, the lively, fast-paced, and much shorter *Coleridge, Early Visions, 1772–1804*, that by the age of thirty-two, the poet had become incurably addicted to opium, which he began taking in his early twenties whenever, he said, he had been "thought-troubled." Knowing this creates the mood described by Dr. James Gillman, the young surgeon who gave Coleridge a home for the last eighteen years of his life in Highgate, on Hampstead Heath, near London. Before Dr. Gillman's first interview with Coleridge, who had been referred to him precisely because of his opium addiction, he feared that the poet would arrive in a state of dangerous, incoherent intoxication. Instead, Coleridge, already an elderly, forty-four-year-old, appeared in his best form. Holmes quotes Gillman who said he sat " 'spell-bound, without desire of release' " as he listened to Coleridge talk for over two hours about subjects ranging from poetry to medicine to his travels. Coleridge joined the doctor's household, becoming a collaborator in Gillman's medical writing and a bosom friend to his wife, Ann. The creation of this curious ménage was not unique in Coleridge's middle age, though its success was; nor was it unique for Gillman, a man prepared for the worst, to experience the presence of this great Romantic figure as the wedding guest does the Ancient Mariner, listening "like a three years' child" as Coleridge held forth magically with his fascinating and wide-ranging talk.

Richard Holmes makes it clear, however, that our apprehension, like Dr. Gillman's, is justified. From 1804 on, Coleridge's is a harrowing, drug addict's life with all that such a life entails of destitution, loss of family and friends, humiliation, and disappointment. But he also clearly affirms many other things we might only be dimly aware of, most importantly that Coleridge is the greatest and most influential thinker of

[1] COLERIDGE: Darker Reflections, 1804–1834, by *Richard Holmes*. Pantheon Books. $32.00.

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the English Romantic period, and his thought not only captures the spirit of the age but anticipates the history of ideas from Darwin to Freud, from process theology to quantum mechanics, from comparative literature to the new historicism. As for Marxism and deconstruction, Coleridge would probably have abjured them as products of the materialism against which he argued throughout his career. Through his metaphysical writing, he sought to describe a unifying, organic essence to reality, which he called God or "Mystery" and of which he thought the clearest earthly sign was the human imagination. Among the many insightful metaphors and examples Coleridge created to embody the union of matter and spirit, one of the best is in his last published work, *Aids to Reflection.* In the passage that Holmes quotes from the 1826 collection of aphorisms and observations, Coleridge considers a cadaver being dissected at the Royal College of Surgeons, and specifically, an extracted eyeball.

> "Behold it, handle it . . . Tendon, Ligament, Membrane, Blood-vessel, Gland, Humors; its Nerves of sense, of Sensation, and of Motion . . . Alas! All these names, like that of the Organ itself, are so many Anachronisms, figures of Speech, to express what has been: as when the Guide points with his finger to a Heap of Stones, and tells the Traveller, 'That is Babylon, or Persepolis'.—Is this cold Jelly 'the Light of the Body'? Is this the Micranthropos in the marvellous Microcosm? Is this what you mean when you well define the Eye as the Telescope and the Mirror of the Soul, and Seat and Agent of an almost magical power?"

As he identifies the arbitrary relationship between word and thing, Coleridge might appear to look ahead to Derrida, though he draws quite opposite conclusions. Actually, he is closer to William Blake. Though he read Blake too late in his life to be much influenced by him, and then only a copy of *Songs of Innocence and Experience,* still Coleridge's question brings to mind Blake's statement in *The Everlasting Gospel* that we are led "to believe in a lie" when we "see with, not thro', the eye." As for Coleridge's well-nigh prophetic farsightedness, Holmes gives the following example of a late entry in his notebooks, when he talked "an increasingly private language, half mystical and half poetic":

> "The Will of the Chaos—its dark disactualizing, clinging Self-Contrariety suspended, and forced asunder to become actual as opposites—Light and Gravity. Yes! This supplies the link that was missing. Now the Life of the living Thing opens on me—what it is—and its necessary union with *Mass*—The clinging wrestle, the old war-embrace of Light and Gravity renewed . . . These are but Glimmer—the sky-blink . . . And now the *living* Soul—what was the Life of Adam? This is still below the Horizon for me."

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Obscure as this may seem, nevertheless one can see terms that would occur to Einstein less than a hundred years later in the Swiss patent office in Bern as he worked on his special theory of relativity. And the French philosopher Simone Weil, a little over a century later, would describe light and gravity in a similar fashion as the two ruling forces of the universe.

Yet Coleridge physically embodied the contradiction to his search for some unifying, nonmaterial essence. His addiction altered his body chemistry in recalcitrant, material ways. No prayer to God or appeal to Mystery or Imagination released him. Nor did he ever find a cure in the numerous changes of scene and living situations that he sought.

Volume two of Holmes's biography begins with Coleridge's voyage to the Mediterranean in April of 1804. His major poetry—"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," "Kubla Khan," "The Aeolian Harp," "This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison," "Frost at Midnight," "The Nightingale," and "Dejection, an Ode"—had been written. Ahead lay his major prose works, including *The Friend, Biographia Literaria, Aids to Reflection,* and the remarkable literary and philosophical lectures he would give in London and Bristol between 1809 and 1819, which were often preserved through his listeners' transcriptions. When he sailed from England, he was really in flight from his unhappy marriage. He would never again enjoy a stable family life with his wife Sara and their three children, Hartley, Derwent, and Sara, who remained thereafter in the household and care of his brother-in-law, Robert Southey. He was also escaping from his unrequited love for Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law, the woman he idealized as Asra in numerous poems of heartbreak. He was hoping, too, to cure his opium addiction. Ironically, he found himself in a region awash in opium, since Sicily was a major grower of the poppy. But he found successful employment in Malta, as a secretary to the civilian governor, Sir Alexander Ball. It was in that post, in writing numerous position papers and political reports for Ball, that Coleridge showed his gift as a prose stylist.

Holmes believes that Coleridge is even more interesting in the second half of his life than in the first. He ends the first volume of his biography by asserting,

> Coleridge's future lies richly, tragically, comically, before him. Indeed in human terms the next thirty-two years are more fascinating than anything that has gone before. Not only does he emerge as a controversial public figure—the legendary poet, the lecturer, the critic, the enigmatic metaphysician—but the inner man, the spiritual voyager, enters far wilder and deeper seas. As a true Romantic figure, Coleridge has scarcely yet set sail.

It is certainly true that Coleridge's adventures in the Mediterranean, recorded in exciting images in his letters home and in his notebooks, have a Byronic cast. They include defusing a volatile international

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incident of piracy that made him the hero of American and British seamen. He also managed to have an affair with a young Italian opera singer whom he met in Sicily. Yet these episodes are interspersed with periods of opium degradation, requiring humiliating enemas because of the drug's binding effect, and cries of self-loathing, recorded in his notebooks, like the entry on his birthday, October 21, 1804: "I have done nothing!"

Coleridge made a handsome living during his two years in Malta, and the 100 pounds he sent home to his family was but a small portion of it. When he returned himself, he was penniless. Coming to the end of ventures and adventures impoverished and sometimes homeless was to be a pattern until he met the Gillmans. Back in England's Lake District, he found it impossible to live with his wife, and he suspected that his friend Wordsworth was involved with Sara Hutchinson. While the former estrangement had been developing for years, the latter suspicion may have been linked to opium-induced paranoia. His single serious attempt to forgo opium altogether caused him such misery he would never try again. Finally, he made his way to London, where he hoped to begin a career as a lecturer and was taken in by the family of a young lawyer and businessman named John Morgan, who in the form of Morgan, his wife Mary, and their daughter Charlotte became, according to Holmes, "youthful substitutes for Wordsworth, Mary, and Asra; and Coleridge orchestrated them into this sentimental pattern with alarming rapidity." As he would with the Gillmans, Coleridge became indispensable to the Morgans. He helped to alleviate John Morgan's depressions, usually brought on by religious doubts, and in general he created a great sense of fun and conviviality in the family. When John Morgan's business failed, and he was forced to flee the country, Coleridge patched together a series of loans that kept his household afloat and eventually allowed him to return. Still, there were times of serious disruption when Coleridge, because of his habits, notably his opium-taking but also his drinking, broke with the Morgans and was forced to find friendly and tolerant others to take him in.

Throughout the years before he entered the Gillman family, it is amazing that Coleridge got anything done, and that what he did do was frequently so brilliant. But Holmes has to have changed his mind from the optimistic prognosis he makes at the end of volume one of his biography. Coleridge's future in 1804 was neither rich nor comic, though it proves to have been tragic, also dismaying, distressing, even appalling. Though Robert Southey comes off as a self-righteous prig and Wordsworth as a self-important one, in their dealings with their old friend, still one begins to understand, despite Coleridge's warmth and charm and essentially loving and generous nature, why those closest to him grew out of patience with him. He was a non-husband and an absentee father, whose absence affected his oldest son Hartley most severely and may have contributed to his failure and certainly caused his estrangement from his father. He was in constant need of funds, though

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he always endeavored to pay his debts. No one could be sure if Coleridge would actually finish his projects or if some psychosomatic or drug-related illness would prostrate him for weeks or months, or right before a deadline or a performance. Though he frequently had bad luck with publishers, he was himself a bad business risk. Learning that Wordsworth actually had said as much to a third party led to Coleridge's breaking with his friend so profoundly that the rupture was never truly repaired.

While opium can be tied to many of the aberrations in Coleridge's behavior during these years, Holmes manages to attribute the most serious controversy, the charge of plagiarism, to Coleridge's opium-taking as well. Apparently one of Coleridge's most original ideas, his theory of organic form in poetry—that is, that a poem's form should somehow grow from within its subject rather than be imposed from without—was not his own, but was lifted from the German philosopher A. W. von Schlegel. Furthermore, as Holmes notes, he "either literally translated or freely adapted, in his lectures and public works," the writing not only of Schlegel, but of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich von Schelling, and Johann Maass, so that much we attribute to Coleridge, from his insightful reading of Shakespeare to his attempts to reconcile religion and science, looks as if it were secondhand. Holmes puts the best or, at least, most acceptable face possible on Coleridge's plagiarism, and does so in terms that reflect our own contemporary attitudes toward psychological turmoil.

> Coleridge undoubtedly stole from the German writers, and lied about doing so. For a man of such originality and intellectual brilliance this is itself an acute problem in psychological terms, obviously connected with the mendacious habits of his drug-addiction, his astonishing lack of self-worth, and the moral humiliations of his private life—not least in the relationship with the Wordsworth circle. This is an area in which biography can, I hope, throw some sympathetic light into the lonely darkness of his solitary study and the endless, sometimes desperate, "night-conversations" with his fellow authors.

Holmes also argues that, although Coleridge stole, he also transformed what he stole, usually by extending the original arguments through his own examples and metaphors, and, in effect, making them his own in language that had "no equivalent in his German sources." Holmes concludes, "Coleridge plagiarized, but . . . no one plagiarized like Coleridge."

That Coleridge stole many of his great ideas does not lessen the fact that they remain influential because of the way Coleridge expressed them. It is possible that Keats never would have come up with the idea of Negative Capability without Coleridge's disquisitions on the power of imagination to conceive of things outside the purview of scientific

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reason. Holmes reminds us that before Coleridge, the English view of Shakespeare was formed by the dismissive opinions of the eighteenth century, notably Samuel Johnson's. Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare as a poet and dramatist remain starting places for modern Shakespeare criticism. It is hard to think of a better metaphor of Hamlet's psychology than Coleridge's tossed-off observation that the Prince of Denmark is like a man surveying the landscape below him from a hot air balloon. That Coleridge thought reading Shakespeare was like watching a waterfall combines a Romantic sense of the sublime and a prophetic grasp of the great poet's enduring power to fascinate. It may only be important that these ideas are signally Romantic, and that it was Coleridge who made them so. The argument about organic form in poetry persists to this day, employed most recently by J. F. Nims on the side of traditional English verse as being closer to the innate symmetry of the natural world and by Alice Fulton on the side of experimental free verse because the recent discoveries of chaos theory reveal nature's asymmetry. Coleridge may only have been the medium of the idea of organicism, but he also gave it torque and propulsion. It is still going strong because he set it going.

Coleridge the influential and magnetic personality emerges as vividly in the pages of Holmes's biography, as does Coleridge the pathetic and disabled drug addict. His power was such that those who had experienced it, but felt it no longer, resented him. William Hazlitt was the bitterest of these critics, having fallen under Coleridge's spell when both were much younger, only to find the middle-aged Coleridge a tragically fallen angel. Of course, Hazlitt had admired young Coleridge the Jacobin, the Pantisocrat with his vision of a utopian society, and was disappointed when Coleridge, like others of his generation, repudiated the tyrant Napoleon and embraced English patriotism as the only answer to French aggression. In his attacks, Hazlitt detailed every weakness of Coleridge, especially his inability to finish things, but on one notable occasion, when both men were lecturing simultaneously in different parts of London, he portrayed Coleridge as he still must have seemed to others who loved him and were close to him. Holmes calls it "the most dramatic and the most personal moment" in Hazlitt's lecture series and quotes Coleridge's harshest critic as remembering mainly how the poet talked.

> "He talked on for ever; and you wished him to talk on for ever. His thoughts did not seem to come with labour and effort; but as if borne on the gusts of genius, and as if the wings of his imagination lifted him from off his feet. His voice rolled on the ear like the pealing organ, and its sound alone was the music of thought. His mind was clothed with wings; and raised on them, he lifted philosophy to heaven. In his descriptions, you then saw the progress of human happiness and liberty in bright and neverending succession, like the steps of Jacob's

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ladder, with airy shapes ascending and descending, and with the voice of God at the top of the ladder . . ."

When Coleridge ceased talking in July of 1834, three months short of his sixty-second birthday, he had become "the Sage of Highgate," in Thomas Carlyle's terms, who had made the pilgrimage to Dr. Gillman's house to meet the great man. Most of his work was in print, both prose and poetry, and the Royal Fellowship of Authors had provided him an annuity of 100 pounds. Though he had not written any poetry to match what he had done before he went to Malta, he had composed the prefaces to "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel," making successes, as his biographer rightly claims, out of failures. He had also written some minor, but extremely moving poems, three of which deserve comment. One of them, "Constancy to an Ideal Object," about the love for Asra which he took with him to the grave, I. A. Richards considered to be one of his best. Another, "To William Wordsworth," Wordsworth himself tried to have suppressed. It recounted Coleridge's open and heartfelt response to hearing Wordsworth read from his magnum opus, *The Prelude,* but it also included a stark, self-pitying assessment of Coleridge's own, inferior achievement.

> Sense of past youth, and manhood come in vain;
> And all which I had culled in wood-walks wild,
> And all which patient toil had reared, and all,
> Commune with thee had opened out—but flowers
> Strewed on my corse, and borne upon my bier,
> In the same coffin, for the self-same grave!

And finally there was the chilling and heartbreaking self-portrait in "Youth and Age," a poem that employed his organic method, finding different and original combinations of lyric forms and ending:

> Dew-drops are the gems of morning,
> But the tears of mournful eve!
> Where no hope is, life's a warning
> That only serves to make us grieve,
> When we are old:
> That only serves to make us grieve
> With oft and tedious taking-leave,
> Like some poor nigh-related guest,
> That may not rudely be dismist.
> Yet hath outstay'd his welcome while,
> And tells the jest without the smile.

Coleridge knew well enough what it was like to overstay his welcome and to hang on a little while longer by virtue of his ingratiating conversation.

By the time he died, he had had a sort of reconciliation with

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Wordsworth, which included a trip to Germany, but mainly both old poets had sailed down the Rhine entrenched in their eccentricities. He had the pleasure of seeing his daughter Sara, whom he had not really met until she was a young woman, and his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge meet, fall in love, and marry, and devote their lives to preserving his legacy. And he had experienced the tragic disappointment of looking on as his oldest son, Hartley, subject of two of his greatest poems, "Frost at Midnight" and "The Nightingale," failed in various careers and withdrew into alcoholism, embodying all his father's fecklessness without his genius.

Coleridge had also reached an unspoken understanding with Dr. Gillman about his opium addiction. The doctor controlled the amount Coleridge took daily, but was also aware that Coleridge had a secret agreement with the local chemist to augment his supply. Insightful about the nature of addiction, Dr. Gillman allowed Coleridge this subterfuge. At the end of Coleridge's life, when he was dying of progressive heart failure, Dr. Gillman administered opium to Coleridge via injection, thus employing the drug for its analgesic power and making, ironically, Coleridge's old enslavement a new form of release.

We can see at the end of this biography how well and truly, and painfully, Coleridge became his Ancient Mariner, in the grip of mysterious compulsions and given the strange power to bind others in the spell of his speech. As a Romantic figure, he combines both murk and brilliance, darkness and light. But one of the most telling anecdotes about him occurs in the first volume of Holmes's biography. In a discussion with young doctors about human physiology and its relation to the mind, he suddenly asked, "Who can explain Wonder?" If we believe science cannot explain it, but that art and religion may, then we are still Romantics in the way Coleridge was a Romantic, compelled by the mystery of imagination.

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RICHARD TILLINGHAST

Poetry Chronicle

JOSEPHINE MILES (1911–85) WAS A RESPECTED CALIFORNIA POET and stalwart of the Berkeley literary scene, where she maintained standards of sanity and rigorous critical thinking even during the turbulent sixties. Recalling those years, I remember the good sense and patience she showed in conversations with students and young colleagues like myself, whose views must have struck her as anarchic and utopian to the point of inanity. While I adhere to what is now seen as the old-fashioned critical approach of trying as purely as possible to read poems as poems, I cannot entirely distance myself from the knowledge that Jo Miles was so severely crippled by rheumatoid arthritis as to be dependent on the full-time assistance of a live-in helper for all the necessities of life. She had to be picked up and carried whenever she wished to move from one place to another. What would writing have been like, I ask myself, for someone so radically cut off from the ordinary life shared by those of us who have the freedom to move through the world, interact with other people, and do all the things we seldom give a second thought to?

Published over a fifty-year period, Miles's poems, some 250 pages of them printed here, reveal a poet who is alert, affectionate, and distanced.[1] Rather than appearing as an actor in her own poems, she is perhaps by necessity primarily someone who sees, and thinks about what she sees. Here is "If You Will" (1974) in its entirety—a fine short poem, which seems to have grown out of an exchange between Miles and one of her helpers:

> Shall I pull the curtains against the coming night?
> No, there is still a fine sun in the treetops; let them be.
> All right, now it is darker; shall I now
> Close out the dark? You will close out the light.
> All right; how quick the dark comes. But see how the moon
> Floods as it floods the earth even this room.
> Moonlight, it's time to sleep, shall I draw now
> Curtains against the cold? It's summer weather.
> Shall I? Yes, if you will; the light will pass.
> It is your life that stands beyond the glass.

However gloomy her own predicament may have been, she mostly kept that to herself, as is clear from "If You Will." You can read page after

[1] COLLECTED POEMS, 1930–83, by *Josephine Miles*. University of Illinois Press. $34.95; $19.95.

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page of these poems and still know little about the person who wrote them. Miles seems to have preferred an impersonal stance. *Poems on Several Occasions* (1941), for example, contains these individual titles, which parody officialese: "Market Report on Cotton Gray Goods," "Committee Report on Smoke Abatement in Residential Area," "Government Injunction Restraining Harlem Cosmetic Co."

Jo Miles had a great gift for friendship. Confined as she was, she particularly valued the company of fellow poets. She also had a strong attachment to her own region, and the poems that evoke the Northern California landscape are among her best. In addition, as she got older, she abandoned the tight stanzas of her earlier work for a looser, sprawling free verse to which she brought a sense of form earned through many years of writing in meter. "Makers," written in the late seventies, invokes the names of California writers less well-known now, and in the East, than they were and are in the West: Brother Antoninus, who "craved against his sainthood"; Yvor Winters, Jack London, Kenneth Rexroth, Leonard Nathan, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan. "Center" captures the Bay Area as a mecca for artists and thinkers, who

> Came in your cars
> Freewayed in valleys millions of miles from the shore
> To converge where the highways converge saying *welcome to here,*
> And to where?
> To tape and percussion, raga computers,
> Rare texts and components of clay,
> With the sea down away past the freeways and out of the town
> To the blockbusting towers of learning and quiet
> Shades of administering redwood,
> Azure dome over all like a bellflower
> And star above star.

Eavan Boland is widely recognized as one of the leading voices in contemporary poetry in Ireland, so the appearance of a new book by her is of interest to anyone who follows the phenomenal literary output of that island.[2] I would be hard put to name a time since the Viking invasions of the late eighth century A.D. when the country has been secure in its domestic tranquility; as a result most Irish writing has a pronounced political dimension. Boland has written some very strong poems about the Irish predicament. Her much-anthologized early poem "The War Horse" has been a favorite of mine for years. I also very much admire her sequence "Writing in a Time of Violence" (1994), especially "The Death of Reason," which dramatizes the violent end of the brief flourishing of Anglo-Irish culture in the late eighteenth century, and

[2] THE LOST LAND, by *Eavan Boland.* W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. $21.00.

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"The Dolls Museum in Dublin," which captures the false security of the colonized capital city.

"Colony," the twelve-poem sequence that comprises half of her new book, *The Lost Land*, would seem to take up where "Writing in a Time of Violence" leaves off. "My Country in Darkness," the first poem of the sequence, presents a familiar figure—one of the last poets of the old Gaelic regime, whose function of entertaining through encomiastic court poems was eradicated by the coming of the English. Boland, though she does not claim to know the Irish language, once did her own version, "After the Irish of Egan O'Rahilly," of one of these old laments on the disappearance of the Gaelic aristocracy. "My Country in Darkness" shows us one of these old bards, his function made obsolete: "He has no comfort, no food and no future. / He has no fire to recite his friendless measures by." In this poem, the first in the book, however, Boland shows a disturbing tendency to present her material in shorthand, to summarize history as though she were under no obligation to bring it to life. Here is the last stanza of the poem:

> The Gaelic world stretches out under a hawthorn tree
> and burns in the rain. This is its home,
> its last frail shelter. All of it—
> Limerick, the Wild Geese and what went before—
> falters into cadence before he sleeps:
> He shuts his eyes. Darkness falls on it.

The sketchy references to the Treaty of Limerick of 1691, which granted rights to the native Irish but was quickly abrogated by the English, and the subsequent departure of the Gaelic aristocracy ("the Flight of the Wild Geese"), plus the offhand invocation of "what went before," as though the poet could not be bothered to bring that history to life, are all too symptomatic of Boland's cavalier attitude toward her material.

It gets worse. In "The Harbour," a poem about Dublin's port, Dun Laoghaire, called Kingstown in colonial days, Boland concludes:

> City of shadows and of the gradual
> capitulations to the last invader
> this is the final one: signed in water
> and witnessed in granite and ugly bronze and gun-metal.
> And by me. I am your citizen: composed of
> your fictions, your compromise, I am
> a part of your story and its outcome.
> And ready to record its contradictions.

All convincing political poetry implicates the poet-as-witness in what is being described; but Boland's stance loses effectiveness because it is so self-aggrandizing. What is worse than her air of self-importance is the

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rhetorical laziness of the last line—again, as if she can't be bothered to do any more than summarize.

Boland is repeating the gestures of postcolonial theory by rote, and the results are just not convincing: "What is a colony / if not the brutal truth / that when we speak / the graves open. // And the dead walk?" In "Daughters of Colony," she does find an image adequate to convey the pathos of the young Anglo-Irishwomen who truly belonged neither to their own country nor to the "mother" country: "I see the darkness coming. / The absurd smallness of the handkerchiefs / they are waving / as the shore recedes." The poem should end there; but Boland must go on for a page more and intrude herself between these characters and the reader:

> I put my words between them
> and the silence
> the failing light has consigned them to:
>
> I also am a daughter of the colony.
> I share their broken speech, their other-whereness.

As if this gratuitous display of ego were not enough to sink the poem seven leagues deep in the Irish Sea, she concludes with more easy rhetoric:

> No testament or craft of mine can hide
> our presence
> on the distaff side of history.
>
> See: they pull the brims of their hats
> down against a gust from the harbour.
>
> They cover
> their faces with what should have been
> and never quite was: their home.

Let me make an obvious point. The talent for writing poetry is a gift; it also involves craft, invention, and hard work, evidence of which is scarce in this book by this gifted writer. As an admirer of many of her early poems, I hope Eavan Boland will eventually recover her passion for the art. A good place for her to start would be to read what Keats says about Negative Capability, which Josephine Miles had in plenty, and about the Egotistical Sublime, a term Keats might have coined expressly to describe *The Lost Land.*

Eleanor Ross Taylor, born in 1928, is a poet of genius with a very slim output. She has averaged one book per decade since 1960. As *Late Leisure* is her second book of the nineties, one might say she has become

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positively prolific recently.[3] Of her style, the easy things to say are that she is reticent, clipped, intensely private. Critics will often praise a female poet by comparing her to Emily Dickinson: in Eleanor Taylor's case that comparison actually makes sense.

In these poems Taylor does a lot of looking back, particularly to her own places of origin. A remote Southern community in "Completing the Pilgrimage," with "A stubborn foxgray shack. / One bending oak too claybound to fall down. / Here the schoolbus turned / and went back to the world," is a place where "All, my mother said, in this backwoods / some kin to me. / The idiot brother. The crazy uncle, too." The fragments, the unpredicated subjects are typical of her style; they allow her to evoke without being very specific, without giving too much information. She is not out to be "confessional," to "tell her story."

The past is a realm of discovery ready to be examined and speculated on, like the button-studded "fabric collage, / a patchwork my child sewed at six" in "On Being Worldly," which the poet examines as she looks over old things from the attic:

> She must have worked their placement
> out with care. Or did she court
> the throw of dice—much like
> the scraps they're sewn to,
> and the years
> of new jobs, lovers, bits
> of exultant paintings, sudden
> phone calls, and accrued birthdays—
>
> a fading roulette I all by myself
> hold out, interrogate,
> and fold back up, and hear
> as nowhere else in the whole house
> the wind from the world terrestrial,
> sweeping the eaves and sparking
> the spiderwebs.

The elevated rhetoric of "the wind from the world terrestrial" is all the more effective in that Taylor rations it, uses it only when needed.

I am struggling to present the full flavor of Taylor's idiosyncratic poetry in this brief space. Here are some titles: "Long-Dreaded Event Takes Place," "Sparrow Eats Fried Chicken Wing," "The Accidental Prisoner," "How He Returned Thanks," "Cuts Buttons Off an Old Sweater," "Contemplating Jailbreak." You should have at least one poem in its entirety, though. Here, rising out of a collection of poems filled with very specific, private reflections, is something that asks to be read as a personal and poetic credo:

[3] LATE LEISURE, by *Eleanor Ross Taylor.* Louisiana State University Press. $19.95; $12.95.

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Find Me

by my trail of fragments,

stale crumbs,

green broken boughs
of protocol.
Footprints
all missteps,

tatters of sackcloth
on the undergrowth,

confused backtracks.
A rough HELP
lipsticked on a map
tossed out too far
with backbite cream.
Here
left the highway

for the woods
pressed jungleward. Discover

a trace of desiccated residue
staining a sheet of paper

struggling to speak.

The "green broken boughs / of protocol" suggest both her respect for life's formalities and her rebellion against everything preordained and unspontaneous. In the "tatters of sackcloth" one glimpses a nature whose ingrained impulses toward asceticism can never *quite* succeed. The effort to "find" Eleanor Ross Taylor, much like the effort to discover Emily Dickinson, involves a search that the most discerning readers will gladly undertake.

As distinguished from Eleanor Ross Taylor, whose poems exude separateness, Wyatt Prunty is a man firmly planted in the middle of things. His poems in *Since the Noon Mail Stopped* are informed by memories of the family he grew up in, and we often see him here as a husband and father in his own right.[4] His keen interest in other people

[4] SINCE THE NOON MAIL STOPPED, by *Wyatt Prunty*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. $19.95.

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shows that he might just as easily have turned his talent for observation to fiction rather than to poetry. Here, from "Seasons," is a sketch of a character who for unexplained reasons lives in a foggy past of self-deception or confusion:

> At tennis, a missed shot meant he had MS.
> Later, over drinks it was the Big Bands,
> Night trains, DC3's, Packards—an express
> Of images held headlong out of hand
> In what he called his photogenic memory.
> No one corrected. Dinner went well.

The details are deftly penciled in, and the lack of definite information combined with the narrator's uncertainty make the portrait memorable: "Then he was gone, / And I stood waving, after what? Self-referee / Of a widower and skeptic who when asked / Said, 'You believe in clear because it's cloudy.' "

"Reading before We Read, Horoscope and Weather" is a touching elegy and a skillful rendering of how one becomes one's own father:

> . . . the back door shut,
> An engine turned, and I woke up his age
> In the mirror of a gray no-scissors cut.
>
> He backed out of his pulling in at night
> As light elbowed past an opened door, failing
> Down six empty steps.

Reading from the newspaper to his own young children, he observes, "Nothing is as funny now as then. / Still, when they rumple in, they bring his eyes / And mine, squinting and wet with laughing . . . " Thomas Lynch, another poet of Prunty's generation, was recently quoted in *Poetry Ireland Review* to the effect that "Some things are always changing. Some things never do. It is the poet's job to keep them straight." This is something Wyatt Prunty does beautifully in this elegy. Everything is different, nothing is as funny now as then, but still "the weather comes, fresh and ignorant of change."

I have enjoyed "Coach," Prunty's elegy for a favorite dog, as much as Robert Lowell's wonderful "Words for Muffin, a Guinea-Pig," another favorite of mine from a *very* off-the-beaten-track genre, poems written in the voice of a pet. "Coach" starts off:

> All trucks were from Hell and deserved my bite,
> All children sheep and not to leave the yard.
> Before I came, the house was unsafe;

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The man whistled and no one heard,
And the huge trucks lumbered.

There is something very droll about a dog's sense that he is in control. Prunty uncannily feels his way into the dog's comically high sense of self-esteem:

Thrown objects were my specialty,
The lazy sticks, their high trajectories,
That, and the knack I had for words—
Here, fetch, hunt, stay, sit, lie down . . .
And names, for the boy, his sister.
I lived those names twelve years, a diplomat
Who read the world four different ways,
Nose, ear, eye, and sometimes what was said.

"Dog, Dog, Object, Object," is a companion piece, a bit more serious because it takes the man's point of view. The observation is very exact, an area where Prunty excels:

There is the long-tongued lap for water
And the wide-jawed, lounging tongue by which he sweats;
There is his three-turn-curling-down-to-sleep
And the stiff-legged, tail-up snarl and stare
That means beware; then the panting that is laughter,
Like his fanning tail's hello. These from the wild,
Whose language is bark, growl, howl, whine, yelp.

Perhaps I have laid too much emphasis on Prunty as humorist; there is no lack of more serious material in this book. Horace famously wrote that poetry's function was to teach and to delight. The latter is a rare enough quality in any endeavor, and it is especially welcome in poetry.

Eamon Grennan is part of that extraordinary group of Irish poets born in the late thirties and early forties that includes Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Michael Hartnett, Paul Durcan, and Eavan Boland. An Irish citizen who has lived in this country since the 1960s, his imagination seems equally at ease in both his native and adopted lands. The emphasis here is on the imagination because, unlike Heaney, Hartnett, Durcan and Boland, he apparently does not feel the need to help define the political and cultural soul of Ireland; perhaps he feels this is unseemly in one who has spent so much time outside his native country. Though not an urban sophisticate like Mahon, he resembles him in seemingly having transcended identification with a particular culture. Graywolf has performed a great service by bringing over two hundred pages of Grennan's work together in this book.[5]

[5] RELATIONS: New & Selected Poems, by *Eamon Grennan.* Graywolf Press. $16.00p.

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My favorite among these poems—though the choice is not an easy one—is "Men Roofing." Dedicated to Heaney, it describes roofers at work, effortlessly using their activity as an emblem—if one may sum this up so crudely—for the coming-together of the physical and the spiritual. The sacramental view of life is consistent with Heaney's; and perhaps only an Irish poet, writing against the background of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, would make such an effort to define peace. Certainly Michael Longley's "Peace," freely rendered from the Latin of Tibullus, is akin to what his contemporaries are after. Grennan may well have been thinking of Heaney's poem "The Harvest Bow," which plays with the concept that "the end of art is peace." He has such confidence in his vision that he doesn't hesitate to enter the poem and state his intention:

> What a sight between earth and air they are, drenched
> in sweat and sunlight, relaxed masters for a moment
> of all our elements. Here is my image, given, of the world
> at peace: men roofing, taking pains to keep the weather
> out, simmering in ripe Indian-summer light, winter
> on their deadline minds. Briefly they stand balanced
> between our common ground and nobody's sky, then move
> again to their appointed tasks and stations, as if they were
> amazing strangers, come to visit for a brief spell
> our familiar shifty climate of blown leaves, birdspin. Odorous,
> their lazuli column of smoke loops up from the dark
> heart of their mystery; and they ply; they intercede.

Grennan is by inclination a poet who most vividly lives in the senses and whose chief preoccupations are with domestic matters, the phenomenal world, eros and the family. He has Negative Capability in abundance. In an early poem, "A Gentle Art," he describes the art of building a fire:

> Lit,
> You must cover from view, let it concentrate—
> Some things being better done in secret.
> Pretend another interest, but never
> Let it slip your mind: know its breathing,
> Its gulps and little gasps, its silence
> And satisfied whispers, its lapping air.

In "Station" we see him as a divorced parent, sending his adolescent son off into the city to the boy's mother: "What ails our hearts? Mine / aching in vain for the words / to make sense of our life together; his / fluttering in dread / of my finding the words . . . " In what follows, he makes the train journey an image of a classically-inspired passage into another world:

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on his own in the city, he'll enter the underground
and cross the river, going home
to his mother's house. And I imagine
that pale face of his
carried along in the dark glass, shining
through shadows that fill the window
and fall away again
before we're even able to name them.

He returns to the moment of the son leaving in "Statue," which uses a Greek *kouros,* "from the lips' full smile to the small / seed-bearing pouch between his thighs, / the muscled legs steady, ready to step / through any drawback or impediment," as an emblem of that moment when the boy, becoming a man, walks off into the world,

as anyone's son on the cusp of manhood,
who will draw himself to his full height
and, holding both those wary hands
loose by his sides, consider in silence
the life that's brought him precisely to this
point of being born again, walking away.

Read Grennan. In poem after poem he creates the miracle of the flesh made word.

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SUSAN BALÉE

Sexy Wits

TO OUR BODIES WE ARE BOUND. They ground us and, in the end, they grind us down. Joseph Epstein begins his latest collection of essays, *Narcissus Leaves the Pool*, contemplating his naked, sixty-year-old bod in a bathroom mirror.[1] What he sees—drooping buttocks, wrinkly red elbows, superfluous sacs of skin—depresses him. Even Narcissus, he tells us, "had he grown well into middle age . . . would surely have spent a lot less time gazing into the pool." Clean living, exercise, cosmetic surgery, a diet rife with leafy vegetables—nothing avails against the inevitable ravages of time. "The body exists to demonstrate, if demonstration is needed, that progress has its limitations."

On *the body*, yes, progress is limited; but not on the mind. This is what I'd like to remind Joe Epstein, who, distressed by the disintegration of his fleshly vessel, seems to have forgotten that he's got one hell of a mind. A woman once told him he had sexy wrists. Sexy wrists, nothin'—what he has are sexy wits! Wits that he keeps about him at all times, toned and flexible. I spent a whole day in bed with Epstein balanced on my rib cage, a cup of fennel tea at my side. Not only was the experience itself delightful, but it left a pleasant afterglow, a warm tingling in my synapses. I found myself wanting to tell everybody what this guy is like between the covers—so funny, thoughtful, original—and, happily, this review gives me an opportunity to do so.

As anyone paying attention to the literary arts in America knows, the best writing in this country today is nonfiction prose. While most of our fiction writers stutter with postmodern uncertainty, our essayists and memoir writers pipe up with confident, distinct voices. Of these distinct voices, Joseph Epstein's consistently hits notes beyond the rest of the choir (his work appears regularly in *The Best American Essays* and other anthologies). In short, he is one of America's best living essayists.

Further, when the man is dead, his works will continue to have a life of their own. In fact, Joseph Epstein's essays will be read long after the rest of this generation's scribblings have sunk into obscurity for a very basic reason: Epstein serves as America's conscious—if not our *conscience*—and he's the guy bearing witness to our era. I don't doubt for a second that centuries from now, people will turn to his essays to understand this period of American history, just as people now turn to

[1] NARCISSUS LEAVES THE POOL: Familiar Essays, by *Joseph Epstein*. Houghton Mifflin Co. $25.00.

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Samuel Pepys's diaries for a peep at seventeenth-century England. Dissertation students of the twenty-third century will doubtless cite him as evidence of what educated Americans read and thought about in the waning decades of the second millennium.

Going back in time, Joseph Epstein also compares favorably to Michel de Montaigne, that great essayist against whom all others are measured. Like Montaigne, Epstein derives some of his greatest insights from the most trivial of topics, as in my favorite from this collection, "The Art of the Nap." This piece begins simply enough with Epstein describing the nap-master's art—how to grab twenty winks without getting rumpled. How to meet Morpheus for a quickie without spending the night in his clutches.

Place matters. "I nap well on airplanes, trains, buses, and in cars and with a special proficiency at concerts and lectures. I am, when pressed, able to nap standing up. In certain select company, I wish I could nap while being spoken to." As a dozeur par excellence himself, Epstein forgives his students when they nod off in his classes. " . . . What the hell, if they cannot arise from my teaching inspired, let them at least awake refreshed." What a refreshing attitude for an English professor!

To nap, perchance, to dream—Epstein's mind ranges to his dream life. He contemplates dreams, insomnia, sleep cycles. Most of us realize we spend a third of our lives sleeping, but Epstein does a more careful accounting of how he's spent his time on earth:

> . . . Sleep—slightly less than one third of total; watching men hit, chase, kick, and throw various-sized balls—eleven years, seven months; reading—thirteen years, four months; following the news—three years, six months; eating and activities connected with digestion—four years, eleven months; daydreaming and hopeless fantasizing—five years and seven months; gossiping, sulking, talking on the telephone, and miscellaneous time-wasting—undeterminable but substantial. . . .

They say the unexamined life is not worth living, but that's a sin that Joseph Epstein will never be guilty of. He examines his life at every turn, and we are the wiser for it. Most of this book is about growing old, growing up, looking back, looking down ("time passes, the day darkens, the grave yawns—and yet I still cannot resist a joke, a witty formulation, a piece of well-made frivolity") and finding a penny on the ground. Epstein adjusts his mental *gravitas* to the downward pull of age, but he's still got a good bit of boy in him—that happy-go-lucky, ball-playing Jewish kid from Chicago rides with him still.

That kid grew up and, surprising even himself, became an intellectual; he had opinions that he defended, that he published. He became an editor and published the opinions of other people. He informed himself, all the better to inform others. Knowledge is power, but is information? Epstein grows old and, with trousers rolled, he steps out of

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the sea of facts and scrapes its flotsam from his soul. He wonders whether "it isn't possible to live deeper down, at some more genuine, less superficial level of life than that promised by an endless flow of still more and then yet again even more information. It has taken me a good while to understand this, but it turns out that the only information I am seriously interested in is that about the human heart, and this I cannot find any easy way to access, not even with the best of modems, fiber-optic cable, or digital technology." Way to go, Joe. You've hit on a home truth. Tell Narcissus to close his eyes and get in touch with his heart. Tell this whole narcissistic generation that, 'cause it's something we need to know.

Knowing what matters teaches us what doesn't. Another stellar piece in this collection, "Ticked to the Min," deals with life's minor irritations. Rage diminishes with age, or, as Epstein puts it, "In these my sunset—make that my dusk—years, I have become a calm, gentle fellow, a relative pussycat, almost comatose. Save the ticking, hold the max." Yeah, anger wanes but irritation rises. Each *mot du jour* leaves Epstein sore—highlight *impact*, *process*, *intriguing*, and *focus*, and then hit the delete key. Please.

Then there are the wordmongers on the nightly news, hawking the day's bloody deeds. " . . . Like the old Persian kings greeted by bad news, I say let's put out the messenger's eyes. Or, in the case of all these television Johnnies and Janes, I say let's put out their hairdos." No sparer of high culture, Epstein also finds Ralph Waldo Emerson "a great gasbag. . . . He was the original talk-show host, with no guests other than himself." But perhaps this isn't a surprising judgment, for Epstein's the fella who says in another essay, "my natural inclination is to prefer talent to genius." Talent is what he learned he had himself, a talent for small things well turned. A talent, in other words, for essays, "I operate at the level of the sentence," he tells us. "I live less in the world than in my head. I long for a wisdom I know I shall never attain." And yet, he's content, he knows he's lucky. He's found his audience and we've found him. Better still, he's found his life's work, and he's good at it:

> Work is for me the antidote, not for any of the world's ills, but for all of my own. Work keeps the black dog from the door, the blue funk on the other side of the window. When working well, my life falls into place; I needn't search for life's meaning but seem temporarily to have found it; I am, in a world not notably arranged for sustained felicity, as close to happiness as I am likely to get. That's what's in it for the talent—the sweet delight in exercising one's gifts—and that is everything.

Like all talented writers, Epstein is a devoted reader. Another sharp essay in this collection is "The Pleasures of Reading." He expresses brilliantly what I have tried, far less brilliantly, to convey to my students in literature classes—the reason why reading matters.

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> What wide reading teaches is the richness, the complexity, the mystery of life. In the wider and longer view, I have come to believe, there is something deeply apolitical—something above politics—in literature, despite what feminist, Marxist, and other politicized literary critics may think. If at the end of a long life of reading the chief message you bring away is that women have had it lousy, or that capitalism stinks, or that attention must above all be paid to victims, then I'd say you just might have missed something crucial.

Reading good literature connects us to other minds, places, times. It keeps us from feeling alone: someone else has gone through what we are now enduring.

Which is why many older readers will find solace in Epstein's reflections on growing old—he's there now, he's currently doing that. Now a sexagenarian, he reads the obit page with avidity. "A bad morning is one on which three of the deceased are younger than I and two are just a few years older. This means that the machine gunner is out and firing indiscriminately. It would be a great help if one knew the exact date of one's own death—one's own true, so to say, deadline—though I am sure that, even with years of warning, one would still manage to be unprepared. I have always regarded the phrase, 'untimely death' as the poorest possible usage; hard to imagine, for oneself, a timely one."

We learn that one's interests narrow with age, but that this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Why waste mental energy on politics, movie stars, major league pitchers? "One is resigned, too, to the world's comedy: idiots rising to the top, fanatics dressed up as idealists, boobs confidently in control." The trick is not to let it make you mad. To let passion subside and detachment grow. To ditch ambition and hope for perspective. Epstein wants to learn to live in the moment, for the moments that remain. "I have to lose my yen for then, suture the future, and at long last put the pow! in now—to make each day, that is, as delight-filled as possible."

Truth be told, I think the guy is gonna make it—make the most of each day, that is. In the course of this book he survives triple bypass surgery and the death of his best friend. He's grown vulnerable and conscious of his heart, but those are doubtless preconditions for living in the moment and making the most of it. Joseph Epstein is a man on whom nothing is lost, so I look forward to reading, in his next book, whatever new wisdom he's found.

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HAROLD FROMM

Peter Conrad, Modernist Rhetor

PETER CONRAD'S *MODERN TIMES, MODERN PLACES*[1] IDENTIFIES ITSELF as an attempt "to understand what it has meant to be alive in the twentieth century." Conrad, a startling polymath, a man of enormous knowledge, intelligence, and wit, is a professor of literature at Oxford and a prolific author of books on cultural subjects such as opera, whose prodigious qualifications raise lofty expectations. But great gifts also underscore glaring insufficiencies, as one laments the book that might have been produced but was not. Insofar as Conrad is successful in his mission, he has created a troubling picture of what it has meant to be alive in our century, an account of the murderous curriculum of carnage and madness that has characterized modern times. But his book is also troubling in the questions it unwittingly raises about the nature of and audience for productions of this sort. In an age of information overload, whom did Conrad have in mind as reader of this 735-page book?

Modern Times, Modern Places is an heroic attempt to characterize a century of modern life by providing a dense matrix of instantiations drawn largely from literature, music, and the other arts but with a certain amount of political and social background supplied as context and structure; and its jacket description, "How life and art were transformed in a century of revolution, innovation and radical change," gives us a general sense of the direction it purports to take. The specifics of this theme are set forth in the opening chapter: with God now dead and the Newtonian universe overturned by Relativity, with Enlightenment faith in Reason now fractured by our experience of human barbarity and irrationalism, with nineteenth-century confidence in the concomitance of moral and technological progress now dashed by the war machines of the past hundred years, with the post-Nietzschean assault on Realism estranging us from any comfortable trust in appearances and, finally, with a general repudiation of the humanistic wisdom of the past as a culturally constructed con-job—we find ourselves in a foundationless, fragmented, basically de-moralized and atavistic world. In keeping with his method of instantiation, Conrad uses the Oscar Wilde/Richard Strauss *Salomé* as a literary/musical distillation of these reversals: here, Christianity is derided, John the Baptist is dismissed as a neurotic, Herod and Herodias are personifications of the dementia of politics and authority-figures, and Salomé herself, though crushed to

[1] MODERN TIMES, MODERN PLACES, by *Peter Conrad*. Alfred A. Knopf. $40.00.

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death for her sins at the end of the play and opera, emerges somehow as a not wholly discredited destroyer of the repressive order of conventional sexual morality. In the musical adaptation by Strauss, the frenzy and harsh discordance of the music (not quite as ferocious as *Elektra*, of which Conrad makes considerable use many times later on) provides a stunning shakeup of seemly musical conventions (admittedly prepared for by composers as diverse as Berlioz and Mahler and not created *ex nihilo*). And it is worth noting how the ethos of writers such as de Sade and Wilde and the sexuality of Salomé have grown commonplace at century's end, as renegades of the past find their way into the mainstream and as postmodernism makes modernism look orderly, coherent, and almost benign.

Conrad takes us on an ideological-aesthetic-political tour of the century by means of thirty chapters, each one focusing on some aspect of modernism, though they are far from parallel, with one on the Russian Revolution juxtaposed with another on Charlie Chaplin. He provides a chapter on Vienna before the Great War (with egregiously extended accounts of Strauss's *Arabella* and Lehár's *The Merry Widow*); another on the Einsteinian revolution; others on modes of transportation, the arbitrariness of language, the mechanization of the human body via technology, Picasso, the de-sacralization of music, weapons of warfare, Freud and neurosis, architecture, Surrealism and Expressionism, primitivism in the arts and its connection with Nazi barbarism (if there is a connection); cameras, films, and movies; the Third Reich, America, Hiroshima, advertising, electronics and home appliances, the collapse of humanism, ecology and myth—Conrad cannot be faulted for failing to touch all bases. So this is a breathtaking survey by a mind that is not just well stocked but overstocked and overflowing. The procedural method is fairly consistent: the deployment of example after example of modernist thought by means of extracts from, summaries of, and allusions to music, art, fiction, drama, and the sciences, an almost endless sequence of distillations, quotations, and metaphorical associations. The display of learning is little short of astounding, given that every page contains myriad allusions fetched up by a mind that seems to have retained everything that was ever poured into it, all with an immediacy that for most of us is possible only within a few days of reading. The effect is of someone who has just re-read the Western canon—and more—a few hours before sitting down in front of his computer. Whether it's Proust (whom he quotes or summarizes obsessively throughout), Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (one of his favorites), Wells's science fiction, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Strauss and Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, or Joyce's *Ulysses*, every moment in each of these works seems to exist freshly and simultaneously in his mind, like the contents of a Random Access Memory. Indeed, the similarities between Conrad's mind and a search engine on the World Wide Web are not to be dismissed since both call up an immense assortment of references, many of which are superficial, malappropriate, or totally off the wall.

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One can derive some sense of this *mentalité* from a paragraph taken almost at random from the longish chapter on science, "Interrogating the Universe," a paragraph that typifies the style and method to be encountered throughout Conrad's 735 pages. Writing at greatly excessive length about Alban Berg's *Altenberglieder*, a song cycle from 1912, Conrad remarks:

> The third Altenberg song—in which a huge orchestra plays subdued, hesitant chamber music, falling altogether silent while the soprano breathes that unspeakable truth—has the infinite littleness of an atomic particle. Berg compressed the metaphysical panic induced by the new physics into ninety seconds. In 1930, Ortega y Gasset reviewed a decade in which Einstein had "extended the cosmic horizon." The sky mapped by Newton's physics looked now, in retrospect, like an attic. Milton in *Paradise Lost* referred disparagingly to "embryo atoms." Einstein demonstrated that these primal grains of matter were not incomplete and unfinished. Yesterday, as Ortega y Gasset declared, the atom was "the final limit of the world." Now it has "swollen to such an extent that it becomes a planetary system." But this vast space emerged from Einstein's observations of motions which were incalculably small: the quantum, his new unit of emitted energy, was the tiniest of measures. Although we now pseudo-scientifically refer to quantum leaps, Einstein's quantum was an imperceptible hop.

I could hardly believe, as I read this passage on page 85, that there would be 650 equally manic, densely allusive, highly figurative pages yet to go. But on page 221: "Dynamite, like the dynamos worshipped by Henry Adams and H. G. Wells, showed off the nineteenth century's unbridled dynamism." On page 246, speaking of a tower intended by the Bolsheviks as a monument to the Third International but never built: "All levels would rotate, though at different speeds: revolution expects that everything should revolve." In a chapter on "Trains, Cars, Aeroplanes," in which Conrad considers the uses made of these means of locomotion in literature and the arts, he writes: "The new tempo extended from transport to the arts. In their psychically automated compositions, André Breton and his surrealist colleague Philippe Soupault valued above all the unthinking haste with which they scribbled, and invented a literary speedometer to calculate how fast they were travelling across the page. . . . Music could no longer be permitted to dilate at leisure and luxuriously repeat itself. In 1927 Darius Milhaud composed a trio of accelerated, abbreviated 'operas-minutes.' He cheated a little, because each of them took seven or eight minutes to perform, but . . . they managed to cram a speeded up reprise of three classical myths. Europa was raped, Ariadne abandoned, and Theseus delivered from danger, all at satisfyingly high speed." And somehow, because Isadora Duncan rode in a car, he needs to remind us how she was strangled when her scarf got caught in a spoke of one of the wheels, though it doesn't have much to

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do with anything. Worse still, because the Kennedy assassination took place in a car, Conrad describes JFK's brains being blown away, in order to observe that "as the car speeds off, a woman desperately struggles to escape by crawling onto the trunk. Here is one of the primal scenes of modern times, and it hints that we are driving our own recklessly hasty hearses." But what has this really to do with cars or hearses—or anything germane to a treatment of transportation? On page 287, speaking of modern buildings, "The emblem of the new architecture—and of the new spatial mentality which accompanied it—was the pagoda, an orientalized Eiffel Tower. Maggie Verver in Henry James's novel *The Golden Bowl* (1904) meditates on an imaginary pagoda plated with porcelain and bedecked with bells. The metaphor, like the quizzical cube in *The Time Machine*, serves to illustrate the multiple facets of the situation in which she finds herself." The image of the pagoda's openness calls to Conrad's mind Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* "where the structure represents a teetering mental folly: a character has built 'one of those piles of thought, as ramshackle and fantastic as a Chinese pagoda.' " Leaving aside the sheer fantasticness of Conrad's recall of such particularities, his next paragraph begins, "The novelists of the early twentieth century revealed the holes in consciousness. . . . Hence the aptness of the pagoda." On page 407: "The new physics supposedly abolished space; there ought to be a way out of that spatial prison we carry around with us, our physique." After an account of the use of robots and puppets in modern artworks such as Stravinsky's *Petroushka* and Capek's *R.U.R.*, Conrad glances at the way prisoners at Auschwitz were treated like automata and robots: "The modernist puppet rejoiced in its freedom from distracting human emotion. The puppets of Auschwitz or Vilna, however, had been robbed of the right to feel, or to consider themselves human." But enough.

Modern Times, Modern Places is principally a rhetorical rather than an historical or analytic work. Conrad is a skilled practitioner of what I would call higher journalism. He writes a prose free of academic jargon and clichés but with maddening tics of its own, often euphonious, epigrammatic, witty, at once terse and loquacious, at times glitzy, and above all, metaphorical. Indeed, metaphor is the favored trope, saturating Conrad's mind and reducing him to its helpless victim. In the samples quoted above, the looseness of terms and the fanciful associations between them yield diminishing returns, badly undermining one's confidence: comparing a song to an atomic particle, speaking of Berg compressing "the metaphysical panic" of the new physics into ninety seconds, introducing Ortega and Milton unnecessarily, playing with dynamite, dynamos, and dynamic, jumping from political revolution to a revolving tower, comparing the speed of writing to the speed of cars, the sheer outrageousness of speaking of holes in pagodas and holes in consciousness, or puppets in *Petroushka* and Auschwitz. This is Metaphysical poetry in the mode of Donne and Crashaw, not social history or cultural critique.

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What is sorely lacking in this overstuffed volume is the ordering force of a continuous and discursive narrative. Where we want analysis and explanation we most often get (admittedly highly sophisticated) summaries of novels, movie plots, and opera librettos punctuated with potted, metaphorical accounts of scientific discoveries and political ideologies freely associated like the images in dreams. When the connection between sequential thoughts is not metaphorical it is apt to be purely rhetorical, elicited by the sounds of the words, their rhythms, vowels, or consonants. The rat-tat-tat of Conrad's predominantly declarative prose combined with the interminably compulsive allusiveness is like the erosive force behind the Grand Canyon, grinding the reader down (but who is the reader who could hang on through such pummeling treatment right to the end?): "Gauguin insisted proudly on his Peruvian birth. Strindberg, encouraged by his example, renounced Nordic puritanism and called himself an honorary Aztec. . . . Kandinsky fancied that his great-grandmother belonged to Mongolian royalty, and Klee believed that his mother, though born in Switzerland, had North African ancestors. Picasso was amused by the rumour that he too had black blood."

This declarative, dramatic, hyperbolic, and metaphorical sensibility warps Conrad's judgment, not only with respect to what he should include and exclude but with respect to his assessment of aesthetic works as a whole. Because Orff's *Carmina Burana* was composed in Germany during the Nazified thirties when the individual was being devalued and the collectivity extolled, Conrad writes: "In 1937 Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* made the political agenda of the season more explicit. The chorus which chants about the delights of spring is the reborn collective, to which individuals must sacrifice themselves. A soprano succumbs to her lover in a slithering vocal diminuendo, and a roasted swan sings deliciously while turning on its spit. These episodes of jubilation are countered by the sombre address to Fortune which begins the work and ends it: in the new pagan culture of Nazi Germany, the body supplies pleasure and imposes power for a while, but must finally be relegated to oblivion." Is this the *Carmina Burana* that we have been listening to all these years? Conrad needs to tell us that Prokofiev's Sixth Symphony quotes a passage from *Parsifal*, intimating an intentional borrowing with some significance for the work as a whole, which is highly doubtful and unenlightening. The symphony in no way can be said to be Parsifalian. The passage in question consists of the second half of a theme in the slow movement in which we hear a sequence of a dozen or so notes echoing a theme in *Parsifal*, a resemblance that could be entirely coincidental, in the way that composers echo other composers because they have assimilated the styles and modes of the canon. (Playing this game, I could cite the first movement of Brahms's Second Piano Concerto, which has a solo passage that goes on for some time like "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," using the notes that accompany the words "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, he is

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trampling out the vintage where . . ." and then it trails off. Was Brahms trying to tell us something? I doubt it. The scherzo of Dvořák's New World Symphony keeps using a passage highly reminiscent of the opening of the scherzo of Beethoven's Ninth. Is this profoundly noteworthy or just part of the unconscious echoing that permeates the arts?) After a lengthy account of what goes on in Strauss's *Arabella*, Conrad concludes, "Summarily betrothed to the Slavonian landowner Mandryka, she begins at once to sing with grateful serenity about being buried beside him in the family grave. Death will be a welcome respite from the need to go on pretending that she actually exists." *This* is the ending of Strauss's *Arabella*? Not *my Arabella.*

With regard to Conrad's repeated allusions to modern science, about which he *seems* to be knowledgeable, I must again admit to a certain leeriness. If I learned anything from the science wars conflict of several years ago (see "My Science Wars," *The Hudson Review*, Volume XLIX, No. 4, Winter 1997) it was that—according to the scientists themselves—the references of humanists to physics, biology, and chemistry are superficial and metaphorical rather than the product of deep understanding. In this light, Conrad's repeated adversions to Einstein, Heisenberg, and others don't always inspire confidence. While his expositions of scientific theories seem plausible enough to a scientifically inexperienced reader like me, the highly figurative uses he makes of them throughout the book have more to do with poetry than with expository precision.

But *Modern Times, Modern Places* does have a number of oases of discursive narration that the parched reader will be grateful to find among the seemingly infinite sands of allusions. (The metaphor bug is highly contagious.) Conrad is good on Picasso and gives us a brilliant discussion of *Guernica.* There is an interesting section on Thomas Mann, who lamented modern culture's infatuation with primitivism and its repudiation of the hard-won benefits of civilization, a plague like the one he dramatized in "Death in Venice." Conrad's accounts of the barbarism of the Nazis as well as the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima are powerful and persuasive: neither Auschwitz nor Hiroshima "could be written off as aberrations or lapses. Both were, in different ways, the logical outcome of modernity and its technological victory over nature. The Nazis had their respectable cultural forefathers and learned apologists, from Nietzsche to Spengler, Heidegger and Gottfried Benn. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist in charge of the laboratory at Los Alamos in the New Mexico desert where the bomb was made, had an even more venerable patron. He was often likened to Prometheus." (But this brief, forceful discussion is followed by pages and pages of summaries of writings about The Bomb.)

"The earth was first discovered, then colonized, finally despoiled." That seems to be the thematic curve that lies behind this curious book. Conrad, at times an extremely appealing authorial voice, has produced a magnum opus that few readers will be able to stick with until the end. What is lacking is the authorial control that would enable someone so

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trapped within a vast forest of particularities to stand far enough away to describe the overall shape and movement of things by means of more than a few quips and epigrams. His forte is the visual and sensuous, his medium of choice may very well be films, his sensibility the kind I associate with the cinema addict's rhetorical gesture, "Do you remember the great scene where . . . ?", but his discursive powers are limited, wanting a certain toughness to ignore the Sirens of Distracting Particularities and to home in on an overarching synthetic discourse. Or to put it another metaphorical way, he's the sorcerer's apprentice, the buckets seem infinite, and he's unable to stop fetching them long enough to see that there are more than anyone could possibly require.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ALFRED CORN's *Stake: Selected Poems, 1972–1992* has just been published by Counterpoint. His translation of Aristophanes' *Frogs* was published in June by the University of Pennsylvania Press Greek Drama series. . . . R.S. GWYNN is the editor of *New Expansive Poetry: Theory, Criticism, History* from Story Line Press. . . . "Charles" is part of *Quartet for Three Voices*, which will be JAMES APPLEWHITE's* ninth volume of poetry. . . . BRUCE BAWER's book *Stealing Jesus* is now in paperback from Three Rivers Press. . . . SYDNEY LEA's seventh collection of poems, *Pursuit of a Wound*, will appear in 2000. . . . CHARLES MARTIN is the author of four books of poems, including *Steal the Bacon* and *What the Darkness Proposes*, both published by The Johns Hopkins University Press. . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS' sixth collection of poems, *Spinach Days*, will be published next spring by The Johns Hopkins University Press. . . . TESS LEWIS' translation of Peter Handke's *Once Again for Thucydides* was recently published by New Directions . . . . North Dakota poet ALAN SULLIVAN is currently working on a verse translation of *Beowulf*. . . . ROBERT RICHMAN's first book of poems, *Voice on the Wind*, was published in 1997 by Copper Beech Press.

N.S. THOMPSON* teaches at the University of Oxford. He has published studies of Chaucer and Boccaccio, and translations of Italian prose. . . . JAMES SEATON's last book was *Cultural Conservatism, Political Liberalism* (University of Michigan Press, 1996). . . . JOHN SIMON is the theater critic of *New York* magazine and the film critic of *National Review*. . . . GEOFFREY BROCK* received the 1998 Raiziss/de Palchi Translation Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets for his work on Cesare Pavese's poetry. . . . JANE MAYHALL is currently finishing a book of poems and a collection of short stories. She is also writing a memoir of Black Mountain College. . . . RENNIE McQUILKIN's most recent collection, *We All Fall Down*, won the Swallow's Tale Poetry Prize. . . . FLOYD SKLOOT's next book of poetry, *The Evening Light*, will appear from Story Line Press in 2000.

CRAIG WATSON* received his Ph.D. in English from Vanderbilt University in 1996. He currently lives and works in Atlanta. "Prayer to Venus" is his first published poem. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's *The Eloquent Essay: An Anthology of Classic and Creative Nonfiction from the Twenieth Century*, will be published by Persea Books in January. . . . KAREN WILKIN wrote the catalogue essay for the traveling exhibition "Stuart Davis and Gloucester." . . . BERT CARDULLO's co-edited anthology, *Playing to the Camera: Film Actors Discuss Their Craft*, is being reissued in paperback this autumn by Yale University Press. His translation of André Bazin's "The Cinema as Digest" will be published in *Film Adaptation*, forthcoming in the spring of 2000 from Rutgers University Press. . . . MARCIA B. SIEGEL is working on a critical study, *Howling near Heaven: Twyla Tharp and the Reinvention of Modern Dance*. . . . BROOKE ALLEN's next piece in *The Hudson Review* will be a review of *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*, by James Wood. . . . ALAN DAVIS' next book, *Alone with the Owl*, a collection of stories, will be published by New Rivers Press in 2000. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest collection of poetry, *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize for 1998. His book of essays, *The Secret of Poetry*, is forthcoming from Story Line Press, as is his next collection of poetry, *Unholy Sonnets*. . . . RICHARD TILLINGHAST's seventh book of poems, *Six Mile Mountain*, will be published in 2000. He teaches writing at the University of Michigan. . . . SUSAN BALÉE is currently working on a book about the history of autobiography in America—the subject of an essay she published in the 50th Anniversary Issue of this magazine. . . . HAROLD FROMM's next piece for *The Hudson Review* will be a review of *For the Love of It* by the critic Wayne Booth.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

The golden age for Wordsworth lies in the past, and his backward glances are invariably tinged with the pain of loss. Sometimes the loss is expressed with terrible intensity as, for example, in the famous couplet from "Resolution and Independence": "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness." . . . The usual course his poems take is not simply to rest with the sense of loss, but to find consolation beyond that loss or even redemption, however constructed. Emotional loss leads to imaginative gain.

—Alfred Corn, "The Wordsworth Retrospective," p. 359.

Seeing Gide, as it were, all over Paris underscored for me—as if one could ever forget—how supremely *French* was the life that Alan Sheridan recounts in this highly intelligent, comprehensive, and fluently written seven-hundred-page tome. For better or worse, other countries just don't produce authors like Gide—or, more accurately, don't have cultures in which a life and career and reputation like Gide's can happen. It's probably fair to say that France itself doesn't have such a culture anymore, either. Which is one reason, I think, why Sheridan's book is valuable: it offers a richly detailed look at a world that no longer exists. . . .

—Bruce Bawer, "André Gide, Evangelist," p. 386.

The city's leading figures—politicians, diplomats, painters, writers, musicians, composers, journalists, and men of the Church—flocked to her salons. Friends, lovers, and husbands dedicated masterpieces to her from all branches of the arts, which she displayed prominently for her guests' edification. Alma [Mahler-Werfel] had always had an eye for genius. Her marriages to the composer and conductor Gustav Mahler, to Walter Gropius, a founder of the Bauhaus school of architecture, and to the poet and novelist [Franz] Werfel, and her passionate but short-lived affair with the Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka, earned her the title of "Muse to the Four Arts," a coveted distinction in a city where art reigned supreme.

—Tess Lewis, "Music Was the Food of Love," p. 405.

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